

Sermon Lent Week 1 Roll Down Justice March 6, 2017

I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies... Take away the noise of your songs. I won't listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God didn't spare God's own Son but gave Him up for us all. Won't God also freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us. Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written: *We are being put to death all day long for Your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created. Romans 8: 31-39

This is the first Sunday of Lent, the 40 days before Easter that echo Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, where He fasted, and prayed, and was tempted by the devil. In this season of Lent we are invited to fast from all that distracts us or lures us from following Jesus in the ways of love, and justice, and righteousness. We are asked to pray as if our lives depended on listening to God and watching for God. And we are reminded again that if we choose to follow Jesus we have to turn away from the devil: and from all the seductive forms of evil... in us, and in the world.

Lent began on Wednesday when we gathered here in the sanctuary to receive ashes, to remember that we were created from dust, and we'll someday return to dust. In this short span that is life, we are to be mindful that we are both made from the dust of the earth and created in God's image. This tension in between dust and glory is where we live, where we follow Jesus, and where He calls us to "repent" (that is, to turn around, to turn away from sin, from self-centeredness, and hopelessness) and to believe the gospel (that is, the good news that Jesus came to deliver God's all-embracing, radically inclusive love for all the world.)

If you're looking for Lent in your bible you won't find it. The church began observing Lent in the 4th century, as a time when new believers in Christ were prepared for baptism on Easter morning, and when people who had committed grievous sins

against others, and had been removed from the fellowship of the Christian community, were given the opportunity to restore relationships. "Lent" comes from the word that means to lengthen, and as is so often true in the spiritual life, there is another, deeper, meaning. As we get closer to Easter the daylight hours lengthen, and in these 40 days of Lent leading up to Easter, Christians are given the opportunity to lengthen and stretch our souls, to stretch and grow in the Spirit.

Lent is a season of anticipation, like Advent is to Christmas, except that the message of Christmas is life and birth, and the message of Easter is death and resurrection. During Lent we are reminded that we are going to die, and that between these two signposts of life and death... it matters tremendously - because there are eternal consequences - it matters how we live.

Today we've heard two scriptures that aren't specifically Lenten-scriptures. Traditionally we begin Lent by telling the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Instead we've heard from the Prophet Amos, who delivered a hard message from God; that when we ignore the cries of the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the outcast, and the stranger, then our music and worship - which we offer as a sacrifice of praise to God - sounds to God's ears like fingernails on a blackboard. When we worship, without acts of justice and righteousness, we're just going through the motions of religiosity. In the days of Amos the Israelites prospered, and they forgot they were God's people, they forgot their blessings were from God, and they became merciless and hard-hearted; selling the poor into slavery, refusing rights to the powerless, and God was sickened by them. Hear again the hard message Amos delivered. [God said] "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of wellbeing of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Justice flows from God's heart. Justice is kindness and mercy, solidarity and help for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, the friendless, the marginalized, and the powerless. Regardless of what we preach or profess, how we practice justice is our witness that we are followers of Jesus, and that we value what God values. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Righteousness is wisdom, integrity, and fairness in our dealings with all others, and rightness with God. What does it mean to be right with God? It's simple. And it's hard. To be right with God is to love... to love as God loves. This love is called agape, and it's how God loves: selflessly, sacrificially, and unconditionally. Agape love originates from God, which is how we know it. We know love, because God has first loved us, and put God's love into our hearts. Agape love has the welfare of others before self; this is how God loves, and for us it's always a work in progress. It happens best in a community where we can try, and try again, and try again, to offer love, and to

be forgiven when we cannot. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Justice and righteousness are what pleases God most. But there’s a danger of focusing on justice and righteousness exclusively: we can become self-righteous, blissfully in love with our own goodness; and we can believe that God is measuring our goodness, and is doling out love and reward to us in response to how good we are. Instead we are to practice agape-love (selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love) because agape love is infused with justice and with righteousness. When we love as God loves we are kind, merciful, fair, and humble. When we follow Jesus we follow Him in the ways of justice and righteous... or as Amos warned the Israelites, we are just going through the motions of religiosity.

Our second scripture this morning is from Paul’s letters to the young church in Rome. You may remember that Paul and I have a rocky history. When I lived in a Christian commune when I was in college, I wore my head covered (as Paul ordered women) and I was silent unless invited to speak (as Paul ordered women) and that made me powerless (as Paul, and the culture he lived in, expected women to be.) I’ve learned to take Paul seriously, but not always literally, and to let him be one of my guides, someone who reveals more of Jesus to me. I’ve read Paul’s beautiful letter at countless deathbeds because it’s an invitation and reminder to surrender to God’s endless and eternal love. You may also remember that Paul was flogged, run out of towns, put in prison, and suffered all kinds of abuse because following Jesus was more important to him than winning friends or being on the right side of any religious or political affiliation. Paul experienced Jesus’ love and it put all the rest of life - including shame and suffering - in a radically different perspective. He wrote to the churches (and to us) “If God is for us, who is against us? And who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Jesus, who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus’ love flows into us, and from us into others, and it has the power to transform the world. I was interviewed by KQED last week because we offered glitter-ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of inclusive love to all people, the whole rainbow of people God loves. The reporter asked if I was aware of division in the church over the issue of inclusiveness, and if I thought the church would split over our differences. I got choked up as I thought about divisions in the church, in our country, and in the world... and how overwhelming it feels. I finally said that we (the church) simply have stubborn hope in the persistence of love. I’m not sure that was a meaningful answer to the reporter I spoke to, but I realized the truth of it for myself. Jesus’ love has changed me, and is changing me, and I believe that His love is the only power in the world that can heal our brokenness and our divisions. Let this be our prayer (to paraphrase Amos,)

“Let agape-love transform us, and justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In the waters of the Jordan River Jesus was baptized, and as He came up out of the water He saw the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove, and He heard the voice of God say, “This is My Child, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” In the waters of baptism, we receive new names: “Child-of-God” and “Beloved.” We experience God’s transforming love in the waters of baptism, and we are named, and claimed as God’s very own. In these waters, we die to sin, and rise to new life in Christ. It takes a whole lifetime to grow into this new life. The words said at the end of the ritual of baptism, when receiving the sign of the cross on the forehead, are, “[first our name] and then, “You are marked and sealed as Christ’s own forever.” Nothing can separate us from God’s love. Nothing can take away our identity as God’s beloved... and as we follow Jesus we discover, as Paul discovered, that nothing is more important than experiencing for ourselves... and expressing to all others... Jesus’ love.

How do we do the hard work of agape-love, of loving like Jesus loves? How do we practice justice and righteousness? We do this by revisiting and remembering our baptism, when we were named and claimed as God’s own. In these waters (and every day afterward) we find that we are loved beyond our understanding, we are accepted as God’s own, and that this love is too great to capture, and too wonderful to keep to ourselves. We are meant to see ourselves as Jesus saw Himself: as “Child-of-God,” and “Beloved,” and we are meant to help all others see themselves as also named and claimed as “Child-of-God” and “Beloved.”

As we move into a time of prayer... I invite you to close your hands - making a tight fist if you can. Lent became a time of giving up something as a sign of penitence in the middle ages. In this season we will contemplate what we need to give up in order to let justice and righteousness roll down in our lives, in our church, in our world. I invite you to think about those who you find difficult to love as children of God - perhaps even yourself. Or maybe it was a prejudice you grew up with that, despite your best efforts, keeps playing in the background of your beliefs. Perhaps it is a particular trait in others that rubs you the wrong way and compassion is just more difficult for you to feel. Perhaps it is someone that has wronged you. Now slowly open your hands, letting go of the tension there and imagine that cool water is flowing into and over them. Let us pray:

We come before You, Creator of All,
knowing that we hold onto self-loathing, resentments and prejudices that we think will
protect us in some way.

In doing so, we dishonor that which You have created.
Forgive us and open us to Your refreshing water of life.

Open us to Your unconditional love
that moves us closer to compassion and courage

to speak up and stand up for what is just and right.

Everyone: Roll down, justice!
Justice, roll down like waters!
Roll down righteousness!
Roll like an ever-flowing stream!

Pastor: We lift up prayers for people whose names we know,
whose circumstances are close at hand.

We lift up other names aloud or in the silence of our hearts
of those in the church, of friends and family, of community members.

Everyone: Roll down, justice!
Justice, roll down like waters!
Roll down righteousness!
Roll like an ever-flowing stream!

Pastor: We lift up prayers for people whose names we do not know but for whom our
hearts break.

Everyone: Roll down, justice!
Justice, roll down like waters!
Roll down righteousness!
Roll like an ever-flowing stream!

Pastor: In this silence we open ourselves to pray for all of creation, for the things left
unnamed, the hurts of which we are unaware and for the deepest yearning of our
hearts.

Silence

Pastor: Now let us pray the prayer Jesus has taught us.

Everyone: *Our Father*, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And
forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not
into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and
the glory, forever. Amen.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

*Jesus invites to His Table all who love Him and want to follow Him in the ways of love,
of justice, and of righteousness. We welcome all people to join us, to meet Jesus in this
holy meal.*