

Sermon Lent Week 3 March 19, 2017

A Word for All God's Children

At our baptism, we promise to nurture others and are reminded that we are to “serve as Christ’s representatives in the world.” Today we ask the question, “Do we as the church look and act like Jesus?” Our song of justice today invites us to dream of a church “where justice is flowing with hope and peace is growing.” What thoughts and behaviors do we need to shed in order to make room for hope and peace to grow in and through our lives and this church?

We Receive the Word of God Matthew 25: 31-40

Jesus said: Now when the Son of Man comes in His majesty and all His angels are with Him, He will sit on His majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of Him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right side. But the goats He will put on His left.

Then the king will say to those on His right: Come, you who will receive good things from My Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and You gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and You gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed Me. I was naked and You gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of Me. I was in prison and you visited Me.

Everyone: Then those who are righteous will reply to Him: Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You a drink? When did we see You as a stranger and welcome You, or naked and give You clothes to wear? When did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?

Then the king will reply to them: I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you have done it for Me.

Would you open the black songbook, “The Faith We Sing” to page 2086? I’d like us to sing that. “Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus... to reach out and touch Him, and say that we love Him. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen... open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus.” I really do believe that is the cry of the human heart~ not that there aren’t faiths that seek God by other names~ but seeing in Jesus the human face of God, is one of the deepest longings of the heart. In today’s scripture lesson Jesus tells us how to see Him. And it’s difficult and painful to see Jesus in this way.

The message of the gospel - a word that means “good news” and refers to the good news that God has given up everything... God’s power and invulnerability, God’s heavenly throne, God’s messenger-prophets... God emptied God’s Self of all that to become one of us, to share our human life, to experience our suffering, to show us the face and the heart of God. (I digress.) The message of the gospel, the good news, is love, and loving is so difficult and painful that we resort to other ways to see Jesus. It

isn't Valentine's Day love that Jesus demands of us... it's love for the stranger and the strange, love for the needy, love for the addict, the mentally ill, the homeless beggar, and the frightened immigrant that Jesus demands of us. Mother Teresa called these people, including those who lay dying in the gutters in Calcutta, "Jesus in His most distressing disguise." I'm going to add to "Jesus in His most distressing disguise" the people we know and wish we didn't... people we find unlikable and intolerable.

Someone recently said to me, "We are all sinners in need of a Savior." We see this so clearly here in Jesus' story of judgment. It'd be so nice to believe in the goodness of humanity and our ability to love and care for others, but throughout history we see the trail of tears and despair that we leave behind us; we see that greed and the lust for power outweighs our desire for justice and mercy; we see our fear and self-protection overrule our compassion and care for others.

I came to love my Methodist heritage when I learned about John Wesley's practical ways to love God and love others... what Jesus called the Greatest Commandment. In 1729 Wesley and his friends at Oxford University formed what they called "the Holy Club" where they practiced their faith so methodically that their fellow students disparagingly called them "The Method-ists." Wesley called their practices "Means of Grace" and "Works of Mercy". The "Means of Grace" were ways of staying in love with Jesus Christ through prayer, reading scripture, meeting together for worship, the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and talking with each other about the life of faith. The "Works of Mercy" were feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, clothing the poor, teaching the children, and protecting the dignity of all people. I mention our Methodist heritage because we've kept pretty-well the "Works of Mercy" throughout our history, and throughout the world the Methodist Church is known for our good works. We're not as well known for our devotion to God... for practicing the ways we stay in love with Jesus.

Loving others, especially "those people" - the annoying neighbor, the "bleeding heart liberal," the "hardhearted conservative," the infuriating family member, or the aggravating person next to you in the pew - you know, "those people" (and we all have our own list of who they are) - they're impossible to love if we're doing it on our own. We can only love "those people" through Jesus. We can only love the hard people to love when we've intimately experience the love Jesus has for us. We have to know that we are unconditionally loved by Jesus Christ before we can do the difficult and painful work of loving all others.

John Wesley, the great do-gooder of his time, who created schools for poor children, and who advocated for temperance because children starved to death while produce was made into alcohol, and who visited and taught in prisons... he knew that what gave him the means to practice the "Works of Mercy" was practicing the "Means of Grace", practicing ways to stay in love with Jesus. Wesley formed small groups that met outside of worship for men and women to practice together and encourage each other to stay in love with Jesus... to be wholehearted in their devotion to Him, to share His love in practical ways with those in need, and to strengthen the bonds of love with each

other. Sometimes the person in the pew or serving on the ministry team can be the hardest person to love... the poor and the hungry and the homeless can be faceless and nameless (and stir our hearts to compassion) but the people we live or work or worship with can seem impossible to love. And so Wesley put people in classes (small groups) to stay in love with God, to do the work of justice and mercy, and to strengthen the bonds of love within the church.

The first part of the Greatest Commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.” We’ve shortened that in our mission statement, which is on the front of your bulletin. It’s right below our name, “Lafayette United Methodist Church.” The first part of our mission (why we’re here) is to experience (and stay in love with) Jesus Christ. When we experience His love for us, it bubbles up like a fountain and spills over into how we live, and how and who we are able to love.

I wish we could celebrate baptism every week. I wish we could come to the fount of God’s love for us and be immersed as a physical and spiritual reminder that in the waters of baptism we have died to sin and ego, we’ve died to having our own way and to living for ourselves. In the waters of baptism (under the waters, really, because they are meant to symbolically close over us) we die to having our way, and we rise to live in the way of Jesus, the way of love.

In the waters of baptism we promise to nurture others and to serve as “Christ’s representatives in the world.” Today, as we consider Jesus’ vision of the coming Kingdom of God, is a good time to ask ourselves if the church looks and acts like Jesus. What thoughts and behaviors do we need to let go of in order to make room for hope and peace, and for justice and righteous, to grow in us? How can we learn to live in the way of Jesus, the way of love?

To live in the way of love sounds pretty agreeable but in Jesus’ apocalyptic drama (His vision of the end of time) He says that who we’ve loved has eternal consequences. Those who’ve loved Jesus in “His most distressing disguise” (the sheep) will be separated from those who’ve been careful and selective about who we’ve loved (the goats) and it’s pretty clear that we are goats. The sheep will be welcomed into God’s Kingdom and the goats will not. We see that without Jesus as Savior, to fill us with love, and show us mercy, to work through us for justice and righteousness, that we’ll be left outside the Kingdom of God.

In His vision of the coming Kingdom Jesus doesn’t say anything about what His followers believe or confess. He says that the criteria for being included in the Kingdom is simply how we love others. All others. I don’t know about you but I find that my ability to love “all others” can easily run dry. I find myself looking for Jesus in His most “appealing disguise” ~ people who appreciate me, who worship like me, who vote like me, who see the world like me... that’s a lot of “me’s.” Jesus asked me, in the waters of my baptism, to surrender “me” to Him, and to learn to love in the ways He loves... all of us (not just me.) When we’re immersed in His love... it bubbles over and we can find a well-spring of love for others.

Jesus said the second part of the Greatest Commandment is to “love others the way that we love ourselves.” Again we’ve shortened that in our mission statement (why we’re here) and you can see it on the front of the bulletin underneath our name. Our mission is to express Jesus’ love to others. To all others. The church exists to stay in love with Jesus, and to love others. Jesus shared a vision with His followers about the end of time as we know it, of God’s Kingdom fully-come-on-earth as it is in heaven. His vision was that His church loves and cares for those who are the lost, and have the least, and who are considered last. His vision was that we will see Him in His “most distressing disguise” and that in loving others, we love Him.

What’s your vision or dream for the church? Each week during Lent we have a strip of paper in the bulletin to write on, to add to the “waters of justice and the ever-flowing stream of righteousness” that God wants. Today you’re invited to write on that strip of paper your dream for the church.

As we being a time of prayer, I invite you to close your hands - making tight fists if you can. Lent became of time of giving up something as a sign of penitence in the Middle Ages. In this season of Lent let us contemplate what we need to give up in order to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, and to live in the way of love... in our lives, in our church, and in the world. Remember that the more we keep our hands tightly clenched, the less ability we have to connect with others as one body. Now slowly open your hands, letting go of the tension there and imagine that the healing waters of God’s love is flowing over them. Let us pray:

We come before You, Holy God of Love, knowing that we sometimes act as if we need no one, unable to give of ourselves and reach out to others. And yet You call us to break down the walls that divide us just as Jesus did. Forgive us and open us to Your refreshing water of life. Help us to create a place in this world that is a sanctuary, a refuge from division - not adding to it. Help us to foster the growth of hope and peace, and move us closer to compassion and courage to speak up and stand up for what is right and good. We lift up to You, Lord, prayers for people whose names we know, whose circumstances are close at hand...

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

We lift up to You, Lord, prayers for people whose names we do not know but for whom our hearts break...

Now in this silence we 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

Let us pray as Jesus has taught us:

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.