

LUMC Sermon
4/24/16

By Don Keeble

Opening Prayer:

Great Lord of the Universe guide us today.

Teach us to think and to do and to say

That which is good and is right and is just;

Show us Your will for our lives.

Lord, lead us to love and to give of ourselves.

Help us to live in Your peace.

Doing for others, the key to good life;

Giving up self the release.

When Pastor Marylee asked me, a few weeks ago, if I'd like to preach the sermon on April 24th, I immediately said yes. Then I asked her what topic or theme I should use. She suggested I pray about it. I asked two other pastor friends of mine and they both said the same thing, pray about it. One of them also suggested I not talk about myself too much and the other suggested including some singing. They both know me pretty well. By the way, I got to pick the hymns today and you might notice they're all familiar and have some pretty nice harmony lines...I love to sing!

I've titled today's theme "Faith and Works". It could also be called "Love and Service". When I was a little boy we knelt around my parents' bed every night and said a Catholic prayer, now I lay me down to sleep.... We always finished with "God bless Mommy, Daddy, Joy, Donny, Neil and Kris". My mom was instilling in me a foundation of faith from a very early age.

Scientists have recently documented proof that prayer actually helps those who are prayed for. I suspect it's at least partly because we all want to be cared for, and knowing someone is praying for us makes us feel worthwhile. But there's also the God part...I believe God heals and the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus are very evident in many people's lives, certainly in mine. I pray for lots of people these days and I make sure to let them know I'm praying for them. And I'm comforted when people tell me they're praying for me.

Speaking of the God part. When my younger son Gus was 8, he asked me "Dad, how come you know everything?". I told him that I was happy he thought I did, but that I actually didn't. I said there are the things that I know in my head because I've learned them; there are the things I know in my heart because I feel them; and there are the things I just don't understand like why our friend Matt Chaney got ALS and I didn't. I have to give that stuff to God because I'd go crazy trying to figure it out. And that's why it looks like I know everything. When Gus was 12, I reminded him of when he was 8 and thought I knew everything. His answer was "well, you pretty much do". So I reminded him of the three things, head/heart/give it to God. When he was 16, I again reminded him of when he used to think I knew everything and he just stayed silent. (pause) Then, just a couple of months ago, the father of one of his good friends was killed in a car accident and Gus, who's now 20, asked me how this could happen to such a truly wonderful man. I had to tell him I didn't know, but I did remind him of the "three things" and told him this was definitely one of those times I had to give it to God because I just didn't understand. It was comforting to talk with Gus about this and at the end of our conversation I told him I loved him and he said I love you too Dad. Very touching, very dear.

When I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior in the late 1980s, I was commuting to San Ramon from Lafayette every day. That used to be a much shorter commute than it is now haha, thankfully I get to work from home these days.

My boss at the time introduced me to Christian radio, 710; 770 and 1100 am. I listened to Hank Hanegraaff, the Bible Answer Man; Bob George and People to People; J. Vernon McGee and Through the Bible in 5 Years; Charles Stanley at In Touch Ministries; and one of my favorites, David Jeremiah and Turning Point. These Christian evangelists taught from the Bible and I learned a lot over the years. Parenthetically, I also participated in a small group Bible study here at LUMC a few years ago where we went through the entire Bible—Old Testament and New—in a year. It was quite an undertaking and I must admit I had to use some online assistance to help me get through some of the Old Testament chapters.

One of the things I struggled with early on in my Christian walk was the idea of grace. If I'm saved by grace through faith in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, then does it really matter what I do in my life and whether I do the next right thing or not? Speaking of which, at one point in my journey, I went to confession with a retired Catholic priest and at the end, he told me my sins, past—present—and future—were forgiven. If that's the case, why not "eat, drink and be merry" as suggested in the Old Testament book of Isaiah and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

The answer, I think, is the statement in the book of James "faith without works is dead". I spent some time pondering that one because how could "grace" be complete if I needed "works" to fulfill it? The truth of course isn't that I "have to" do works, it's that I'm so grateful for my salvation that I became a changed person, one who doesn't have to be of service but rather wants to. In fact, I am compelled and propelled to be of service in lovingkindness by the same faith and grace which sets me free.

One of my favorite authors and spiritual guides is a Franciscan priest named Richard Rohr. He publishes a daily meditation and I've pulled from several recent ones.

"From Richard Rohr 4/12/16: Any external behavior that puts you on moral high ground is always dangerous to the ego because, as Jesus says, "you have received your reward" (Matthew 6:2).

And: "It is God, who for God's own loving purpose, puts both the will and the action into you" (see Philippians 2:13). It is not mere rule-following behavior but your actual identity that is radically changing you. Henceforth, you do things because they are true, not because you have to or you are afraid of punishment. Now you are not so much driven from without but you are drawn from within. The generating motor is inside you now instead of a lure or a threat from outside."

"From another of Richard Rohr's daily meditations, this one from February 29: According to Genesis 1:26, God isn't looking for servants, slaves, or contestants to jump correctly through some arbitrary hoops. God simply wants mirroring images of God to live on this earth and to make the divine visible. That is, of course, the way love works. It always overflows, reproduces, and multiplies itself. God is saying, as it were, "All I want are icons and mirrors out there who will communicate who I am, and what I'm about." The experience of election, belovedness, and chosenness is the typical beginning of this re-imaging process. Then, from 2 Corinthians 3:18: "We, with our unveiled faces gradually receive the brightness of the Lord, and we grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect". You must first surrender to the image within yourself before you will then naturally pass it on--and then you become a very usable two-way mirror."

Lafayette United Methodist Church is a living, breathing organism. And service is a key ingredient. If we counted up all the volunteer hours that everyone spends doing church work, well, like the commercial says, that would be a lot of hours! I think about Robyn Roberts painstakingly putting all the tiles in the “river” for our new courtyard; Joe Darrell and others going to Costa Rica to do service work; the Gerringers leading us to bless our community through Bethlehem Experience; Winter Nights; all the knitters and special projects folks who do so much; and of course Ginny Leavitt and the Rummage Sale currently going on in Fellowship Hall.

Stop a moment and think of the things you and others do for this church. Isn't it amazing to see so many people giving of themselves? Oh, and a special shout out to those who do “anonymous good deeds”, like the saints who keep stepping up to make coffee on Sunday morning. As a member of the choir who gets here early on Sundays, I for one really appreciate that!

Our church is a vibrant, living community which thrives because so many of us put our resources into keeping it alive and well. And that we do so willingly, with humility and love, is both beautiful and heartwarming.

I'll finish with another quote from Richard Rohr, this one from last Monday:

God's basic method of communicating God's self is not the "saved" individual, the rightly informed believer, or even personal careers in ministry, but the journey and bonding process that God initiates in community: in marriages, families, tribes, nations, events, scientists, and churches who are seeking to participate in God's love. There is no other form for the Christian life except a common one. Until and unless Christ is experienced as a living relationship between people, the Gospel remains largely an abstraction. Until Christ is passed on personally through faithfulness and forgiveness, through concrete bonds of union, I doubt whether he is passed on by words, sermons, institutions, or ideas.

In the immortal words of Tiny Tim Cratchit from A Christmas Carol: “God Bless Us Every One!” Amen.