

Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021

Mark 1:14-15 *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

John the Baptist, who had only recently baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, has been arrested by Herod Antipas. Jesus has found his calling and his voice after his time in the wilderness and picks up where John left off: "Repent!"

The word "repent" can bring some rather negative images to mind. It can remind us of a church that is more about making people feel bad and guilty for their behavior; standing in judgment and condemnation as the proverbial finger is pointed. It seems a long way away from the message of a church like ours that is accepting of everyone "no matter where you are on life's journey" a church made up of people who would reach out with compassion, understanding, inclusion and declare a God who was quick to forgive (or at least, that is what we aspire to!).

The call to "repent" on the lips of Jesus is not a command to feel guilty about things. But it is a call for us to change the direction we are heading. We are being called to turn back towards God, rather than moving away from God. Throughout our lives there are times when the decisions we make and the paths we choose to walk down can take us away from the paths God would have us walk. It sometimes seems impossible to turn back once we are headed down the road.

Jesus' message is that we can turn around; we can change direction; we can choose a different path. The Good News is that when we do turn around, we find a God who is filled with love, compassion, and forgiveness. We discover a God who seeks the lost sheep, a God who welcomes the prodigal son, a God who celebrates when the lost coin has been found.

Prayer: *Merciful God, help us to examine our lives and to turn back toward You without fear, for you are abounding in steadfast love and always welcome us back. Amen.*

Monday, March 29, 2021

Matthew 25:37-40 *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

During a weekend mission trip with high school youth to work with the Twin Cities Urban Immersion organization, the group facilitator asked us, in a morning reflection, to be on the lookout for Jesus the remainder of the day.

Considering the text from *Matthew 25*, I thought it was a great way to send us out the door. But, as we got into the vans to take us out to help clean an area homeless shelter, or others to sort items at a second-hand charity store, or others to prepare and serve lunch at the community kitchen, there were some jokes: "You can't be Jesus, you don't have a beard." "No fooling around today, Jesus is going to be watching!" "It's too cold to be wearing sandals."

But by the time the kids returned for the evening meal, their reflections spoke to the ways they had been mindful of that important request: be on the lookout for Jesus. "I saw Jesus, and she was worried about her children having enough to eat." "I saw Jesus, and he helped me figure out how to work the register." "I saw Jesus, and after he asked for seconds, he asked if he could help clear the dishes."

The world is transformed when we begin to see things from God's point of view. How different it is when we view all those around us as God's beloved sons and daughters. When we give assistance and compassion to those in need—we are ministering to Jesus. Keep an eye out for Jesus today.

Prayer: *God of Compassion, give us the eyes to see all those around us as your beloved children; our brothers and sisters. Help us to see Jesus in those who are in need. Amen.*

Tuesday, March 30, 2021

Matthew 22:37-39 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

In the “Essay” portion of the *Ministerial Profile*, which I filled out in hopes of discerning a new call (eventually finding its way to the First Congregational Church, Port Washington Search Committee!) I was asked to complete the thought, “I am passionate about...”

My answer made use of this text from Matthew. I answered that I was passionate about Jesus’ teaching to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And further, that there must be a strong link between these loves.

I wrote about my personal experience, early in my ministry when I almost burned out because of my passion to love my neighbor through ministry with the least and the lost. The one-sided love led me to feel broken and resentful. I got upset with church members who did not share my passion, and then I felt unappreciated by the people I was attempting to assist.

I was “saved” from burnout by developing a closer relationship with God through prayer and reflection. But soon began to feel that if the passion to be closer to God was all I pursued; I could become so inwardly focused on God’s Spirit that I forgot all about the world beyond my prayer journal. (My wife, Laura, has sarcastically declared that I could be off in a monastery!)

Love properly rooted in the love of God, compels us toward love of one another. A love grounded in both love of God and love of neighbor is my key to living fully and faithfully. I believe it is a calling we all share. Jesus holds these two “commandments” together for a reason: each one is partial and incomplete without the other.

Prayer: *God of love, help me to fulfill your commandments in a balance of love for our neighbors and love of you with all our heart, soul, and mind. Amen.*

Wednesday, March 31, 2021

Matthew 18:21-22 *Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*

"Jesus didn't really mean we have to forgive seventy-seven times, did he?" This question was posed to me as I was greeting worshippers on their way out of church. I was a little surprised, because I had just preached a sermon that basically challenged the congregation to practice forgiveness. At the time, I was pretty sure that, yes, Jesus really did want us to be more forgiving. Not that we should keep score with our pardons until we reach seventy-eight, at which point the gloves come off! But in general, in this text, Jesus was challenging his disciples to live with an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness that pushed them past their comfort level.

I feel a little more nuance was probably called for in my preaching than I was able to generate at the time. I know now that this text has been used by those who abuse their position or power to silence those who seek justice for wrongs they have suffered. "Why won't you accept this situation, I said I was sorry!" I know now that there can be patterns of destructive behavior and addictions in which a simple acceptance and quick forgiveness only serves to enable and reinforce the destructive behavior.

And yet, I have known good, church-going brothers who will not talk to each other anymore, though they are not sure exactly why. And their pride says they cannot offer the olive branch they long to receive, or they will lose the fight. I have witnessed faithful, choir member sisters so angry over the rightful owner of the "tchotchke" that used to sit on grandmother's mantle; that cousins, aunts, uncles are forced to choose sides on where they will spend Thanksgivings. The challenge remains. Forgiveness is hard work. But holding onto our anger, resentment, jealousy, and spite is perhaps more damaging to us in the end.

Prayer: *Forgiving God, we have all fallen short of the mark. Give me the strength I need to live with an attitude of forgiveness. Help me to seek mercy not just for myself, but for all those you love. Amen.*

Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2021

Matthew 6:9-13

*“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our
debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.”*

Many of us lift a version of this prayer almost every day. It is a beautiful prayer, but most Biblical scholars believe that it was meant to serve as a format for praying rather than as a prayer to be memorized and repeated (as quickly as possible, in some churches!). However Jesus intended; it has much to say to us. It begins “Our Father” rather than “My Father” which means that a community of believers is presumed to be a part of our faithfulness and that God doesn’t belong to any one of us, but to all of us.

We pray for a time when God’s Kingdom will come, and God’s will be done. Which means that all other kingdoms are relative, regardless of how important or precious they are to us, and that there is yet much to be done in the world we occupy to make it as loving, just and whole as heaven. We don’t pray for wealth and luxury, just enough bread for today; we pray for forgiveness and also pledge to forgive others; we pray for assistance as we face trials and temptations. It is astonishing in its simplicity.

Speaking of simplicity; in her book, “Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith” Anne Lamott writes, “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’” I love that quote. Unfortunately, we can get carried away with religious language, and make our prayers pretty but meaningless. Or we stop praying because we feel like we don’t know the proper language to use. I think God is pleased when we turn towards God, period. “Help me, help me, help me” and “thank you, thank you, thank you” will do just fine.

Prayer: *Hear our prayers, O Lord! Help us to find whatever words will keep us talking to you and seeking your direction for our lives. Amen.*

Good Friday, April 2, 2021

Matthew 5:43-45 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”*

We tend to forget exactly how radical Jesus was during his life and ministry. We become so familiar with the parables, and teachings of the Gospels; with the comfortable atmosphere in our churches; with the promise of grace and God’s love that Jesus can become “domesticated”. That is, tame or safe; our personal little savior, “isn’t he cute!” But loving one’s enemies fits into the “Jesus as radical” category.

One of the elements of Good Friday is the knowledge that Jesus was crucified because he was dangerous. He was a tangible threat to religious, economic, and political power in Jerusalem. We may be tempted to fit Jesus’ calling to all-encompassing love into the more typical themes of Good Friday: the tragic and heartbreaking certainty of God’s love fundamentally rejected by a world that chooses “the shadows rather than the light because their deeds are evil.”

But if we put “love of enemies” into the context of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s non-violent political resistance and civil disobedience— suddenly its ability to take power away from the “enemy” and transform it into energy for the oppressed becomes clear. Suddenly our “cute” Jesus becomes radically dangerous to those who are oppressing others. On Good Friday the cross that was meant to put a stop to this dangerous Jesus becomes just the beginning.

Prayer: *As we consider the cross this day and look at the world around us still filled with hatred and anger, may we be “dangerous” like Jesus and find the strength to love even our enemies. Amen.*

Holy Saturday - April 3, 2021

John 3:16-17 *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

John 3:16 has been called “the epitome” of the Gospel. If you had to boil down all the teachings of the New Testament and all the books written about the theology of Christianity into one sentence, it would be difficult to come up with something better than, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” There are several stories that involve Karl Barth the pastor, professor and neo-orthodox author of multi-volume “Church Dogmatics” who when asked by a student about summing up the meaning of Christianity said, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” So, that’s a pretty good one too.

On this Holy Saturday we contemplate the love of God. The love which takes the hatred of the world onto God’s own self. Suffers pain, humiliation, betrayal, abandonment, torture, exhaustion, and death at the hands of those who he loved. In the silence of this day, amidst the emptiness and inaction; the waiting and hopeless watching; we experience the feeling of our own powerlessness. Yet, the love of God remains.

As *John 3:17* will remind us, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God’s love wins. As we contemplate God’s love we are assured that tomorrow a new day will dawn, despite our worst, despite our faults and failings, the Son will rise.

Prayer: *Divine Spirit, the cross reminds us of the place where our sins and Your love meet. Your holy love overwhelms all barriers in the stillness of this day. Give us hope to greet tomorrow with joy. Amen.*

Easter Sunday - April 4, 2021

Luke 24:31-34

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

Happy Easter! The appearance of the risen Christ to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus has become a model by which we understand the church and the sacrament. In our worship we welcome the stranger into our midst, we share the word of scripture, the stories of the Hebrew prophets and of the person and work of Jesus and as we break bread together in the sacrament, our eyes are opened, and we recognize the risen Christ present among us. We continue the tradition into our present worship services.

It is such a beautiful story, filled with wonder and mystery; filled with transformation; with the joy of discovery and the excitement of carrying "Good News". God's love will not be silenced by hatred and violence. God's love responds to the sins of the world with power that we did not know was possible. God's love brings new life and those who align themselves with this love find their hearts burning within them with new energy and new strength and resilience.

This Easter, may we each experience the joy God intends. May we truly encounter the divine love which transforms our dead ends, into new beginnings. The Lord has risen! He has risen indeed!

Prayer: *In the words of Charles Wesley, from "Christ the Lord is risen today": Love's redeeming work is done; fought the fight, the battle won; death in vain forbids him rise; Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!*