Teaching Old Dogs

Unity Church June 22, 2024

Selections from John 14-16

Anyone who grew up with siblings know that they can be your sharpest and loudest critics regarding whatever you’re doing. If you’re near the bottom of the pecking order, they wrap this criticism under teaching or helping. The idea is seldom expressed outloud but the inference is I have so much more experience than you so I am eminently qualified to lay my wisdom on you. If you note some sarcasm in all this, it means that your ears are working.

The reason for mentioning this is that my sister and one of my brothers has frequently pointed out the same critique of my sermon writing over the past 14 years. My brother says that I don’t put a handle on the fork, and he’s referring to the type of fork used to clean out box stalls. My sister is a little more polite and says that I don’t, “Tell people what they should be doing,” end quote. Others have voiced similar complaints.

This observation is not without merit, it is true that the majority of my sermons are not long on action, that is, me telling you what you “should” be doing or how you ‘should’ be living. This is not by accident or oversight. There is a logical explanation for it, at least I think it’s logical. Indulge me a moment, please.

Over the past nearly 15 years as I’ve gone from a furniture builder who preached on the side to a preacher who recalls making furniture, there is a quiet, back of mind question that I think any pastor worth their salt wrestles with: That is, what specifically am I called to do?

First, as a follower of Jesus Christ, a redeemed sinner, I am called to love, just like all of us are called to love. The two greatest commandments revolve around love, love God, love your neighbors. As a pastor, I am called not only to actively love, but to actively demonstrate, teach and encourage love, but then, the argument could be made that each of us have a similar call.

Second, again if we are following Jesus, if we are called to leadership, we are called to servanthood: washing feet at the last supper, the first shall be last, etc.

Like the first one above, we are all called to this one also. Given some time, I suspect that we could fill in 3,4 and 5 of this list, if not more, but the reality remains: all that I’m called to, you’re called to.

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But what’s interesting, this list goes back to the idea that I talked about last Sunday regarding my father. He didn’t preach it as much as do it. I’m not comparing him to Jesus, but there again, Jesus didn’t preach it as much as do it. If you consider the majority of Christ’ teachings, (I hesitate to use the word generic) they are broad, over arching ideas. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “As You go along spread the good news,” “Let your light so shine before men.”

The Old Testament Law was specific regarding so many different aspects of daily life, what to eat, what sacrifices had to be made when, what is clean or unclean, hundreds of rules and regulations founded on the original 10 that Moses brought down from the mountain. Jesus turned around and basically said, “I can distill all of these and the prophets down to two, Love God, Love your neighbor.”

In light of this, going back to my opening remarks about criticism of my preaching style, I hear people saying that we want you as the preacher to tell us what to do, specifically. And my mind goes toward that scripture which people hate, Philippians 2:12b, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

At first blush, it’s so much easier to have someone else make all those hard decisions for you, wrestle with different aspects of how it looks to walk out one’s faith, in short work out your salvation for you and you simply come and sit in the pew each Sunday, and say, “Yea, that makes sense,” and then go on your merry way.

There’s a problem with that though. If you simply embrace my salvation as your own, it’s rather like a 12 year old putting on his Dad’s suit. He might be clothed but they don’t fit. In fact he looks a little silly wearing a coat that goes down to his knees, especially if his dad weighs 250 pounds and the kid is all of 65 pounds. The point being is that my salvation is not your salvation any more than Jake McFerron’s shirt would fit me or vice versa. My sins are not yours, your doubts are not mine, the personalities and thought patterns of either of us is different from a third or fourth individual.

Let me refocus all this by saying that in my opinion, (and I might be wrong,) but in my opinion, the job of a preacher is to be a facilitator, that is someone who helps you connect with our heavenly dad, who gives you ideas and questions that encourage you to wrestle with as you work out your own salvation. And yes, my job is to help you work out that salvation, but it is not to work it out for you. I told a group of seminary students that we as preachers need to recall that we are the garden hose, not the water. 2

What got me thinking about all this is that back about 3 weeks ago, I read the entire 17th chapter of John in a sermon about Christ’s Ascension. The following week we looked at parts of John 16. I said that after Pentecost, I’d like to look at this section of the gospel of John more closely.

First, a little background: this section of John from chapter 13 through 17 is all one setting. That is, it starts with the preparation for the Passover, what we call the Last Supper and ends with Jesus’ arrest in the Garden at the beginning of chapter 18. If you happen to have a Red Letter edition of the Bible, there is more red ink on these pages than anywhere else in the gospels, with the possible exception of Matthew 4-6.

The Synoptic Gospels record the Last supper, the washing of feet, Judas slinking out to betray him, Christ’s prediction that Peter will betray him and then the whole group heads for the Garden of Gethsemane. John’s recording of events is that first of all it was a very long supper, but that Jesus has all the disciples around him, he has their undivided attention and instead of speaking in parables and analogies, he lays it out to them.

Although I’ve never found the venue or place during Holy Week to fit it, I’ve often thought that we should read this in it’s entirety as a sermon instead of me running my mouth. These 4 chapters teach Christology because it is spoken, laid out, explained by Jesus Christ himself, clear, straight forward, unvarnished. I feel that the whole book of John is a counterbalance to Paul, but these 4 chapters is the meatiest part of the meat, if that makes sense.

We’re going to spend a few weeks in this scripture, but to tie it into the front part of this sermon and the idea of how each of us work out our own salvation, I’d like to focus on the Holy Spirit. In this piece, Jesus first mentions the Holy Spirit in chapter 14:15-18, “If you love me, you will follow my teachings. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and is in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

He restates this idea in verse 25-27, “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” 3

We will spend time with chapter 15 later, but jumping over to 16 starting with verse 7, “But I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

(I’m chuckling right now, recalling that one of my mentors observed that I had an awful lot of scripture in my sermons. Yes, yes I do.)

According to these 3 pieces of John, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, or Paraclete,(The one who walks beside) first of all lives with and in you, (14:17). He will teach you all things and remind you of everything I, (Jesus) have said to you. (14:26) Furthermore, He will prove the world to be wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:(16:8) and the Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth. (16:13) Jesus tells us that this spirit will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.(16:14)

I’ve said before, that as good Presbyterians we get nervous when someone starts talking about a spirit, or traditionally a ghost in the idea of the Holy Ghost. We’ve said it for years as we recited the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in the holy Ghost…” but in the back of our minds we’re quietly saying, “Yea, yea, whatever.”

Most of us have memories of going to Charismatic worship services with speaking in tongues, prophesy and folks dancing around like they’re high and frankly it gave us the willies. It was so removed from our experience in a staid, formal worship service that it was easy to reject it out of hand. Worship after all should be proper, respectful, traditional, that was not, period. So when someone starts talking about all this “spirit stuff,” we shut down or worse turn off.

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I think we’re throwing the Baby out with the bath water. Not only are we turning our back on one third of the Trinity, I’d argue that we’re turning our back on the most important part of the Trinity as far as us working out our own salvation, and as far as us figuring out what we are to do with this belief in Jesus Christ.

I’ve mentioned in other sermons that we accept Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, we embrace the idea of eternity, and that our sins are forgiven, and then comes that million dollar question, Now what? He, the Holy Spirit, is the ongoing answer to that question.

He teaches us all things and reminds us of all things about Jesus. In other words, the Spirit is who shows us how to be like Jesus, how to love like Jesus, how to serve like Jesus. After showing us, he reminds us. We can read the recorded words of Jesus, but this Advocate, this Paraclete, reminds us of those teachings as he shows us how to apply them.

Furthermore, He, the Spirit defends you and your faith as he proves the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. As he leads you into all truth, you will gain more of understanding of how screwed up the world is in its thinking and actions. That guiding into all truth in my mind goes toward wisdom. Solomon said that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear in this sense is not being afraid, but to hold in reverence, to embrace.

Which leads me to close with the reality that I’m really going to give you something to do, or something you should be doing. There’s an old Yiddish saying, “If good fortune comes to your house, offer him a chair.” I don’t think I need to explain that. Jesus said, in Matthew 6:33 after criticizing all our worry and racing around getting things, said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The KJV says, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

This seeking is the very act of inviting this Spirit, this Ghost, this Advocate, this Paraclete, not only into your house, but into your life, your marriage, your job, indeed every aspect of your life, and then be sure to offer him a chair.

Amen

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John 16:7-15

7 But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8 When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 about sin, because people do not believe in me; 10 about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; 11 and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

12 “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. 13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

John 14:25-27

25“All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 14:15-18

15 “If you love me, keep my commands. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and is in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.