

Detail:

5-17-20 Sermon “Kept In Our Hearts

I’m overwhelmed at times by the stories in the news of nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers, along with EMTs, firefighters and police officers, and other first responders and caregivers who are going far, far beyond the “call of duty,” if you will, to care for people in the midst of this pandemic. I read about caregivers who work with and around people suffering from the virus for 12, 16, and sometimes 24 hour shifts and then go home and stay in their garages or in RVs in their driveways so that they don’t risk infecting family members. I hear about care providers who work in nursing homes or similar places who just move into the facility to care for those impacted there, rather than take a chance on bringing the virus into an otherwise uninfected space. I’ve seen stories of restaurants giving away food to caregivers, of businesses voluntarily shutting down their normal business operations in order to turn their manufacturing capacity over to making masks, or ventilators, or testing swabs. I see example after example of people doing the right thing, caring for others, loving their neighbors.

Our theme scripture for our series, “The Heart of the Matter,” says “they ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” One way we can be glad and generous as followers of Jesus Christ is to share how we are finding strength, hope, love, and peace in these days that, for many, seem anything but hopeful. I find hope in these examples that I have shared with you and with others. How about you? Where do you find hope? Let us know that on our Facebook page.

In this week's scripture, we are encouraged to obey Christ's commands, which are to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love ourselves. So let's unpack that a bit. And I begin that unpacking by asking, what have you done lately to honor the holy in you - to love yourself, and take care of yourself? I saw something on Facebook the other day that said we'll all come out of this shelter-in-place time as either a monk, a hunk, a chunk, a punk, or a flunk. I'm still considering where I might fall in that lineup. So, how are you truly caring for yourselves during this time. Likewise, have you, like I shared earlier, witnessed or heard about people doing the right thing for others, loving their neighbors? I know we have people in our congregation who are doing some of those same kinds of things, day in and day out. What are you seeing?

In our reading from John's gospel today the resurrected Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit will be with them when he is gone. "If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Companion, another Helper to be with you always - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees nor recognizes...but you can recognize because the Spirit remains with you and will be within you."

"If you love me and obey the command I give you," he says. Even though it sounds like it, this is not a conditional or transactional statement by Jesus - there is no quid pro quo in his "If you...then I" statement. Jesus knows that his disciples love him and will obey his command. There is no doubt on Jesus' mind about this. His rhetorical approach here isn't intended to be conditional, so much as declaratory. This will happen. God will be sending another another Helper. When I'm gone, you will not be alone.

The Holy Spirit, the Nicene Creed tells us, proceeds from God the Creator and Jesus the Redeemer. That is, the Spirit brings the same gifts, the same presence to them in a different way than they did. They will not only know Jesus' presence in the Spirit, they will BE Jesus' presence through the Spirit. The Spirit of God is within them, because they are created in the image of this same God who created them. The image of God is that seed of God with which we are all created - our likeness to God is how we live that out - how much like Jesus do we live, how closely does our living follow Jesus and reflect Jesus' presence in us.

“Those who obey my commandments,” that is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, “are the ones who love me...” Jesus claims. And you'll remember, as we have learned before, Jesus is not talking about some emotional connection here; this is not some romantic, Valentine's Card, Cupid's arrow, Jesus-is-my-boyfriend kind of love. In scripture, to love is an action, it is to do something. In the words of the prophet Micah, it is “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). In the letter 1 John, the writer puts it this way, “Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God, and knows God. The person who doesn't love (we can understand that here as the person who doesn't ACT in love) does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).

John Wesley, in establishing the tenets of Methodism had a set of rules for his followers, what are now known as the General Rules in the United Methodist Church and that the late Bishop Reuben Job, several years ago described in a book of the same name as “Three Simple Rules, that very succinctly say we are to:

Do no harm

Do good

Stay in love with God

The Spirit of God within us always, ALWAYS, calls us to do good, to do the right thing. Doing the “right thing” is something that we as followers of Jesus Christ, notice I didn’t say as Christians, but as followers of Jesus Christ, always strive to do. Sometimes doing the right thing is difficult, sometimes it’s not popular, sometimes it’s uncomfortable. Doing the right thing sometimes means making sacrifices for the benefit of others, so that we don’t bring harm to others. That’s what a follower of Jesus Christ does.

The name “Christian,” has in many ways become a label to describe a broad swath of people, many of whom are not acting in what we might characterize or recognize as “Christ-like” ways toward our neighbors. And we’re seeing even more of this as our stay-at-home orders extend into a third month and protestors, many of whom call themselves Christians, while wearing masks, while intentionally refusing to stay safely distanced, picket while carrying assault weapons while toting racist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic banners and signs at state houses and in residential neighborhoods, endangering others, spreading the virus, and ultimately needlessly exposing those selfless caregivers I talked about at the beginning, as well as their families, to infection, illness, and possible death. Jesus’ admonition to love ourselves was never about, and never excuses

loving ourselves at the expense of or by bringing harm to our neighbors.

For those who are the subject of these protests, I would encourage them to take heart from the epistle known as 1 Peter, where the writer says,

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” (1 Peter 3:13-15)

“Sanctify Christ as Lord.” To sanctify means to set apart, to make holy. Claiming Christ as Lord means that nothing else is Lord in your life, that is, nothing else has the highest place, the highest priority. The commandment said “we shall have no other gods before God.”

When we sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, we recognize and acknowledge that the same holiness, the same image of God that resides in us, resides in others as well, and it calls us to see that holiness in others. It calls us to do the right thing in the name of Love, even when doing the right thing isn't easy, isn't convenient, and maybe even costs us something. Sometimes the right thing, even the hardest thing, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Loving God, loving neighbor, and loving ourselves however, always begins with three simple rules: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with, or put another way, build your relationship with God - the God who is love. So, when we have no other gods, when Jesus is our Lord, and that idea, that belief, becomes holy for us, then we do not bring harm to others. We do not do things that could potentially bring harm to others. Period.

We talked in Confirmation this week about what it means to claim Jesus as Lord in your life, that it means that nothing else, no body else can be the top priority, the guiding principle in your life. If Jesus is Lord, nothing else can be. In the period of the early church, the Roman empire, as a sign of loyalty, demanded that all citizens, subjects, and slaves proclaim “Caesar is Lord,” or face possible execution. To say, instead, “Jesus is Lord,” was to make a dangerous political statement. And while the aspect of danger is not as high, at least not in the U.S., to say Jesus is Lord remains a political statement because it implies that “Caesar,” or the ruler of the day is not, that one’s political ideology is not, that one’s religious identity is not. If Jesus is Lord, NOTHING else is Lord. A true follower of Jesus has a much easier time claiming Jesus as Lord than do many who lay claim to the title “Christian.”

When I was about confirmation age I remember having a conversation with my pastor in his office at the church one day. And while I don’t remember the exact content of the conversation, some four and half decades later, I do remember his words to be me that day. He told me simply, “Love God, and do as you please.” Now, that seemed amazingly freeing and liberating to teenage me, perhaps too much so. But I soon came to understand that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, there are some things that, if I love God, I will not do; things that, if I truly love God, will not please me to do. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

Jesus, in this post-resurrection appearance is announcing to the disciples the coming of the Holy Spirit into their lives even before the momentous events that we know occur on Pentecost Sunday. He’s telling them that the Spirit will be another Helper - John’s being the

only Gospel that phrases it that way, *another* Helper. Jesus, you see, has been the first Helper according to John. But when Jesus ascends, the Spirit will take his place, and through the Spirit the followers of Jesus will do even more and greater things. Why? How? Because the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth was limited to the body of Jesus as he walked the earth in a particular time and place. With the Spirit now prepared to fill all of the believers, those who trusted in and followed Jesus, the power to do justice and love kindness, the power to love God by showing love to neighbor, would grow exponentially.

This larger passage in John begins and ends in love. Verse 15 begins with Jesus telling his disciples that if they love him - which he knows they do - they will keep his commandments to love God, love neighbor, and love one another. "Just as I have loved you," he says in the prior chapter, "you should love one another." And he continues, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We see here the overwhelming, repetitive, circular emphasis on love. And Jesus does that because, as he knows better than anyone, God IS love.

A church member in a previous congregation that I served told me once that I preach about love too much - that I never preach about Law, or the Ten Commandments, judgement, or the end times - that I need "preach the Gospel" more often. That statement kind of set me back. The word "Gospel" literally means "good news," the good news of the Gospel is that God love us unconditionally, so I never thought it possible to preach too much about love. And I still don't, because Jesus preached about love more than just about anything except the Kingdom of God and money. The whole of the Law and the Prophets, Jesus said, could be boiled down to two commandments: love God and love neighbor. When asked which commandment was greatest,

Jesus bypassed any specific one of the Ten Commandments to suggest that the greatest commandment was to love God. And the second was like it - love neighbor. Never mind that if you look at the Ten Commandments, the first few are all about loving God and the remainder are all about loving neighbor. And judgement? I go to John 3:16-17, where it says in verse 16, "God so loved the world...", and in verse 17 that "God didn't send the Son into the world to judge the world, but to save it." And the end times? Well, Jesus said even he didn't know about when it would happen, but he said be ready. And he said that the final judgement would be based, not on what we believed, but on how we treated the least of these, our brothers and sisters. In other words, how we loved our neighbors. Is it even possible, as a follower of Jesus Christ, to preach too much about love? I don't think so!

But don't just take my word for it. If you want to think about eschatology, or whatever the end times or the final judgment looks like, it's worth noting, as theologian Jaime Clark- Soles points out, "that love is tied to John's realized eschatology. Jesus gives one commandment: to love." [again, an action] "Therefore judgment and eternal life begin now. At the end of each day, and during each moment of each day, for John, there's only one question to ask yourself: 'In what ways did I or did I not love today?' As you reflect upon that, judgment happens. Where you did not love, there lies judgment. But understand that for John judgment is merely diagnostic, not retributive. Jesus constantly asks the characters [in the Gospel] questions that help them understand their lives and motives more clearly...He asks questions not because he doesn't know the answers; rather he asks so that we might know, and therefore move

forward with clear vision into the truth, light, glory, [and] love abundant for which God has created us. It's all of a piece."¹¹

Richard Rohr would suggest that he asks the questions, not so that we would know, but so that we would be reminded of what we already know. And we do know this don't we. We know it deep down - God is love. And we are commanded - but more than commanded, invited, expected - to both love God and to love our neighbor. And we love God BY loving our neighbor. By doing no harm. By doing good. By staying in love with God. When we see others in the news and in our neighborhoods, not angrily waving banners and assault weapons, not shooting down innocent joggers, but quietly and steadily helping others, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, lifting up those who have been trampled down in our society, keep those in your hearts. Because, whether they are "Christians" or not, they are following Jesus Christ, and they are the people who bring hope and who bear God's promise of abundant life for all. Amen.

¹¹ Commentary on John's Gospel, workingpreacher.org, Jaime Clark-Soles, accessed 5-11-20.