

Sermon
2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Sermon by Rev. Michael Cobb
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Woodbury UMC
March 27, 2022

So here we are pretty much at the halfway point in Lent, right in the middle of a time of deep reflection on what it means for us to be made a new creation in Christ. Russia invaded Ukraine just a little bit before Ash Wednesday which, for me, has added a whole different color to my perception of this Lenten season. I referenced the invasion during our Ash Wednesday worship service, and, earlier this week, we emailed out several articles on Ukraine and its Christian community, United Methodist community and some of the things that are being done there and offering ways that you could help if that is of interest. We also have sunflowers today given in support and recognition of the bravery of the people of Ukraine.

So, I'm talking about Ukraine. I'm talking about Ecuador. Normally this would be when we would recognize the work of UMCOR on UMCOR Sunday. We're going to do that next week in order to give the good work in Ecuador just a little bit more attention this week. Then, of course, adding in communion every

week during Lent means that I'm trying to craft a good worship service. I'm trying really hard to be mindful of not putting in so much that we go too far over our typical hour for worship. That generally means watch my sermons and watch our scriptures. I really thought today I was just going to have one scripture offered, but the two are so good. I felt that they were both really needed so I hope you'll pardon that.

In 2 Corinthians we're told that if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. Everything has become new. Further, we're told that all is from God who reconciled himself to us through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. The next verse reinforces that in Christ God was reconciling to the world himself, not counting their trespasses against them. In my notes I bolded this **entrusting the message of reconciliation to us**. Paul goes on to say that we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making God's appeal through us. Then he concludes it is up to us to carry the message of reconciliation to all people. In fact, the reconciliation of all of creation to God's own self through Christ, I think, I understand that. But, is there any practical application for us in these words? Is the scripture telling us anything that we can put in action or at least use as a guide for how we live our lives? Or, at least a guide to how we live the part of our lives that we

dedicate to the church? For a few months I have stated that by talking about stewardship and then spiritual gifts and then about how God has equipped this congregation, my hope is that it will help us get more clarity on what it is that God wants us to do.

All of that you could sum up in visioning. If you want to sum it up in visioning, then it's worth pointing out that this congregation, well before my time, spent some time on visioning about four years ago. I've seen the results of that listed as four points. Two of those points were: (1) increase church growth and (2) enhanced community outreach. That makes sense. We are to make disciples. You've got to engage the community and perhaps the church grows. Three years ago as of next month, I learned that the congregation's Community Assessment Team presented its findings to church leaders. The CAT team had one slide that just has burned itself into my brain about attitudes towards church. It had two subsections that said "what are people's reasons for not participating if they aren't already going to church?" and then "what are the reasons for considering not going to church if they're already here?" "Too judgmental, not current, old-fashioned, not relevant, didn't feel welcome, disillusionment with or distrust of religion" were the answers. In those two sections they both repeated "too judgmental" as the top reason to not

come and a reason to leave if you're here. It doesn't shock me as much as it did when I got those last summer, but it still stings and begs the question, "How is it that we can faithfully carry a message from God that has been entrusted to us to reach people that believe that we specifically are judging them so hard that they become disillusioned and want nothing to do with us? I note that the results, as I understand them, don't say anything about the people of our community rejecting God. It says they're rejecting us. People rejecting the church in order to more closely follow Christ. That demands its own sermon for another time.

So, to serve Christ, at least when many of us think of Christ, we think of radical love and acceptance. What must we do differently for people to perceive in us that radical love and acceptance? It's a hard question, right? So, we'll skip it. What could we do so that people would agree that what we are and what we do is relevant to their lives? What do we do so that people perceive what we do as up-to-date? Are we offering anything that doesn't seem up-to-date to you? How about those who say they didn't feel welcome. Might we do something differently that would make people feel truly and deeply welcomed on more than a superficial level? That's what I got out of the CAT findings. Which means none of

these are hypothetical questions and, of course, none of them are easy questions, either.

Over the time that I write my sermon, it changes and then usually Saturday or Sunday, I clean it up. Today I was procrastinating and I saw, published this weekend in the New York Times, a focus group talking to a diverse group of teenagers about their lives. I'll just quote, "What became quickly clear in our latest Times opinion focus group and what may have accounted for some tentativeness is that several of the teenagers felt worried about being judged about what they said no matter if the answer was their opinion. Some were worried about saying the wrong thing." "If you're not super educated on a topic, it's scary to put your opinion out there because you don't want to be wrong," said one of the teenagers. I bolded in my notes: **no matter if the answer was their opinion**. So, we're not talking about being factually, demonstrably, empirically wrong. We're talking about being perceived as having said the wrong thing. Church, I think that is unbelievably important. Youth and young people believe they will be judged on matters having nothing to do with fact, but simply for having the wrong opinion. You might be feeling judged yourself right now. Doesn't feel good, does it? Or you might be offended by all of this because you're not judgmental, you're not irrelevant.

You resent being called judgmental and irrelevant for one thing. Stop it because, if you're resenting someone for giving their honest opinion, they'll notice. Remember, I just said that if you're not irrelevant and you're not judging everyone, then what can you do to demonstrate that to people?

What can we, as a church, do to demonstrate that to everyone as is our call from 2 Corinthians? Again, not hypothetical because whatever answer you come up with, we're probably not all going to come up with the same answer. But, whatever you think the answer might be, that must be what we do forcefully, loudly, deliberately. It must be more than just words. It must be actions if we are to have any hope of following that scriptural imperative and being ambassadors of Christ, sharing the message of reconciliation with which God has entrusted us. If we're tentative or if we do something because we want to get something in return, this will fail. All right, so that's kind of a bummer. So, what can we do? What hope do we have? A few minutes ago I used the word radical as in the radical love and acceptance of Jesus. I've been in small groups here where we've decided that the word radical isn't always helpful. If that word, to you, is not helpful, it is safe to call it prodigal - prodigal love, prodigal acceptance. What does the word 'prodigal' mean? Prodigal means wastefully

extravagant. From our scripture you may have thought that prodigal meant misbehaving or run away or something like that. No. Prodigal means wastefully extravagant.

As it is so often the case, when you are at a crossroads, going to the gospel gives us a good reference point for where I think we ought to go. It's ironic. I mentioned I'm trying really hard to keep things short. This is the longest of all the parables in the gospel. The two parables that come right before it, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin, are really good. They are really short and they make a difference in understanding this one. In fact, I learned while preparing this that this story was not in the first common lectionary that was developed back in the 1980s. It was inserted as an alternative in the season of Pentecost and only in the 1990s did the revised common lectionary put it in Lent. Think about that. If you only know a little bit about Jesus and you only know a couple of parables, this is probably one that you know. And it wasn't even in the lectionary. A theologian I read named Arlen Hultgren points out that that movement matters, saying that the difference in where you put this parable in the church year has strong implications on how you interpret or understand the message it's giving you. If you put the parable somewhere in Pentecost it is more about teaching moral

behavior. It is more about teaching you the Gospel. But, if you put this on a Sunday in Lent as we now have, and if you are trying to maintain the mood of Lent that we have, the mood of Lent that we have been doing for weeks now, it seems a little bit more advising, a little bit more exhortation concerning the hearer's need for repentance. Again, something I hope you'll think about if you are doing one of our lectionary Bible studies, where would you put this in our whole church year? Advent? Maybe some other time. It makes a difference. My point being, in our Bibles, we typically have little titles noting what different sections are all about in order to kind of break up a big block of text and also to make it easier for most of us to understand what's going on. These are editorial. They are suggestions. They are not in the original Gospel writings or Biblical writings. For this section, if you get rid of them, what you end up with is a section that just starts off saying a man had two sons and then it goes on from there.

When we were getting ready for today, we thought to put this painting up front instead of in the back where it normally hangs. It's a famous painting of the return of the prodigal. One of the things that I about love it is, in that big dark section, there are faces in there that we don't hear from during the parable. We'll definitely have to preach on that one at some point. In the story,

you know, the younger son takes all that he has, wastes it, branding him the prodigal son. I ask you today to consider the father as key to this scripture. The father offers extravagantly wasteful forgiveness. I think that's unbelievably important. Why? Because the son doesn't get what he deserves. He doesn't get justice. He gets extravagantly wasteful forgiveness from his father who has every right to say I don't want to see you again. And there's more. This is Bible times. This is a heavily patriarchal society with strict rules about how you respect your parents and knowing one's place. And the father breaks those rules at least as badly as his son does, maybe more. Picture it. He sees his son on the horizon. He goes running out in his sandals probably with black socks on, too. Probably everybody there knows if he's a boxer or a brief guy. There is no dignity to be had in this scene.

I think it's on us to be prodigal - in our welcome prodigal, in our love. Prodigal in our every interaction with anyone who will take a chance on interacting with us and without hesitation if it costs us some dignity to do so. If I poked around online or eavesdropped around town and someone kept calling us the prodigal church, that might be the proudest moment I would have had in my ministry. If we could introduce a sister or a brother to Jesus by not being too focused on our dignity, would that be worth the risk

of looking as foolish as this old man running out to greet a son? Not sure? How about five people? How about 10? Would we be willing to look ridiculous if it meant connecting 10 people to Christ in a meaningful way? Last week when we discussed, after church, movements in the worldwide United Methodist Church, I suggested that the formation of a new denomination as well as decades of arguing about how to treat LGBTQ people. I think that's going to get some attention. I think some people and that some media may want to know more about what is going on with the Methodists. Should that happen, my wish is that our answer not be whispered, not be equivocating, not be legalistic.

Remember the CAT team told us people already see us as judgmental and irrelevant and the fact that so many of them have also said they are disillusioned means that they've encountered church people before and disillusionment was their conclusion.

My deep wish is that our answer be prodigal. That it be prodigious in its over-the-top-ness in a way that is lavish and extravagant and impossible for anyone to see us as judgmental or irrelevant. Indeed, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is real, then there is nothing more relevant and nothing less judgmental.

One more thing to us has been given: the ministry of reconciliation. What is this in practical terms and how do we do

this as a church? How do we do it as an individual? It is between you and God, but how do we do it as a church? Let me suggest that as we seek to do ministry that we seek to do ministry with people and not to people or at people. Next week we'll talk a little bit more about UMCOR. UMCOR is a great example because we only ever work with people already on the ground telling us what is needed rather than swooping in with whatever we think will save them. We're talking about Ecuador today because Ecuador is a great example. We're taking a Lenten offering all throughout Lent including Easter because we had our Missions and Outreach chair, Paul Hibbard, reach out to the Methodist leaders we know in Ecuador. We asked what is the single thing you need most right now more than anything else? They told us it's up to us to decide how we want to respond. You see the difference. That is so much better than us figuring out what we think they need and bringing it to them. They tell us what they need and we work on it with them together. I think that God knew what he was doing because God knows that ministry with people rather than at people or to people means that the relationships you develop with those people have the chance to become the best part of it. I would ask if you would stand if you were part of the Ecuador trip with the church. Pay attention to who that is because I hope you all come to our fellowship hour afterward and ask them how did the relationships

that you had or the conversations that you had fit in with people. I mean we want to help people, but God loves you, too, and I think that the relationships that you get are God's love in action to you, too. If we're going to put effort into really anything, anything at all; if we are going to put effort into it, why would we do so while depriving ourselves of the best part of it - those Christian relationships. Ours, I am convinced, is a prodigal God and the love God has for each and every one of you is lavish and extravagant so go and do likewise. If we're going to take seriously the job of being ambassadors for Christ then nothing less will do. May it be so. Amen.