
A Holy Nation: Bible Study

The Fifth Episcopal District of the
African Methodist Episcopal Church



Year Three - Pentecost

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1st Edition

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Introduction to a Holy Nation: Bible Study

Greetings to each of you in the holy name of Jesus!

We have developed this Bible Study curriculum to undergird Bishop Clement W. Fugh's vision for the work of the Fifth Episcopal District for this third year of the quadrennial. Most of our local churches have some sort of weekly Bible Study gathering. It is our hope that the lessons provided here will be used by each local church.

For this third quadrennial year, we focus on the Season of Pentecost. This is a season of miracles, signs, and wonders. We will plant seeds of expectancy and reach out for lost souls. While the central scripture of the call to be a "Holy Nation" issued at the Watergate continues to be our primary scriptural focus for the quadrennial (Nehemiah 8:1-10; I Peter 2:1-10), the scriptural focus for the 2018-2019 Annual Conference Year, in particular, is John 20:19-22:

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. **21** Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." **22** When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

and Act 2:1-21:

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **5** Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." **14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: **17** "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. **18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. **19** And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. **20** The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. **21** Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

This Bible Study Guide engages each of the lectionary texts assigned in the Revised Common Lectionary for Pentecost for Years A, B, and C. Thus, the studies will support the life of the Church this year and for years to come, especially in the season of Pentecost.

Each contributor was asked to observe the following format for the Bible Studies, consistent with the framework used in the Commission for World Mission. It is as follows:

1. Title

2. Date

3. Opening Prayer

4. Scripture

5. Contemporary Context: A descriptive engagement of the context which will serve as the interpretative lens through which you will read the text. The following questions provide a guide:

a. How do you connect with the text?

b. Where are you coming from?

c. What about your context connects with the text and why?

6. Exegesis: An exegetical engagement of the selected text, locating it in its original context. These are as precise as possible with respect to addressing the text/s we assigned because many of the texts are closely connected. The following questions provide a guide:

a. What is important or helpful to know about the original context of the text (i.e., What was the world like when the text was written? What were people like when the text was written? What other things did people believe when the text was written)?

b. What strikes you about the words used in the text? Do these words have other meanings in their original languages or contexts?

7. Conversation: Putting the text (as you understand it) in conversation with the contemporary context and exegesis provided. Here, we consider: what does this mean for our lives, and our life as a community?

8. Questions: A set of discussion questions relevant to our community consciousness. These should enable study participants to engage their contexts, dig deeper into the text, and extrapolate from the text such meanings as may emerge for their specific contexts.

9. Media: Engagement with art or other forms of symbolic representation in a manner which could lead to deeper engagement or study.

Contributors

We are grateful for each of the contributors who prepared Bible Studies for this collection. Please review the Table of Contents that reflects the scope of this project and the breadth of participation throughout the District. We are especially grateful to our new and returning contributors. We also wish to thank you faithful copyeditor, Mrs. Amy Emery Brown.

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An Holy, Loving, and “Democratic” Spirit: What Pentecost Reveals about God

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04 November 2018

Scripture

Acts 2:14-21

Prayer

O Lord, please help us discern the entirety of the revelation given to us at Pentecost. Please help us see not only what Pentecost says about us and our mission, but also what this moment says about you.

Contemporary Context

What does the event of Pentecost tell us about God in times when folks appeal to God, nation, or identity in order to silence others?

We live in a world where some flesh doesn't get to speak—in our society and churches. Not only are certain bodies/voices routinely silenced and ignored; we sometimes operate as if there are people who have nothing to offer and nothing to reveal. This silencing is harmful enough, but when it's combined with our tendency to only do for those who can do for us—we create some of our most pernicious and enduring forms of violence and exclusion. We often don't give our “best” to those whom we've labeled as “undeserving.” We often give our best to those in our groups of belonging or to those who've scratched or will scratch our backs. Yet, because God is Holy and Love, God doesn't operate that way. Just as God gave us Jesus—and Jesus is a gift to the world whether the whole world recognizes it or not—so too does this same God give “all flesh” the Holy Spirit to prophesy. Pentecost reveals that everyone possesses the ability to disclose the reality of God—even if they have yet to “call on the name of the Lord.” This revelation is a “hard teaching;” but we must accept it. Make no mistake; Pentecost tells us something profound about God.

I am aware that Pentecost is profoundly connected to evangelization and mission. I am certain and hope that this conference year will produce countless sermons, lessons, conversations, and conversions that disclose how the Holy Spirit moves upon us disciples and “the crowds”, so that many will accept Christ. I in no way wish to diminish this aspect of Pentecost, but the Spirit me led to consider something that might be easily overlooked.

Exegesis

After the disciples prayed together and the Spirit fell upon and blazed among them, they began to speak in different languages about the power of God. Peter addressed the crowd and interpreted this event as a sign of the “last days” prophesied in the oracles of Joel, whereby God would pour the Spirit upon all flesh so that all would prophesy and that signs and wonders would be seen throughout creation. This outpouring would occur and then those “who call upon the name of the Lord would be saved.” This section is so rich, but let us mine a particular question: what does this outpouring tell us about God? The outpouring tells us many things, but it clearly reveals God’s holiness and love as enduring features of God’s character.

God’s holiness is summarized in the words of Isaiah, “[God’s] ways are not our ways.” To be holy is to be radically different than the world around us. Holiness does not mean “better.”¹ The first order of holiness is “different” and unexpected. Holiness calls us to live differently, not self-righteously. God is radically different than us and God doesn’t do things the way we do things. Yet at the same time, God is radically close to us and this closeness of God is made manifest in God’s love. In fact, the primary, routine characteristic of God’s power is love. Stated another way, though God can do all things, God routinely gets things done in and through the power of God’s love. God is love, and God’s love embraces, affirms, challenges, saves, and empowers.²

The gospel is a powerful story that narrates to us God’s holiness and love in the person of Jesus Christ. Holiness: Jesus—God’s communication made flesh—pursued holistic and sustainable relationships in unexpected ways. Love: Throughout Jesus’ ministry he embraced (the Leper), affirmed (woman with the issue of blood), challenged (chief priests), saved (sick, demon possessed, sinners, etc), and empowered (disciples and apostles through the Holy Spirit). To live faithfully on our Christian journey is to hold holiness and love in tension, so that we might participate in the creation of a beloved and holy community. The Gospel is a story that shows us how Jesus (God in Christ) did just that. The gospel/story saves. And we must share this story.

Pentecost reveals that the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of God’s Love, and it is this very same spirit that rushed in and blazed amongst the disciples. The Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak in the languages of others, to enter into the world and cultural codes of others to speak about God. In other words, they didn’t force the crowds to speak their language in order to convert them. Godly evangelism is not me forcing you to speak my language. This is not, “speak my language or perish.” That’s the longstanding demand of every oppressor. But God is not oppression nor is God like the oppressor. God is the God of all, sinners and saints, human and non-human. God doesn’t need anyone to be saved or a part of a particular group before God can love them or include them in the divine plan. This doesn’t mean that we need don’t need saving. We do. It simply and profoundly means that salvation does not precede God’s love for us. God saves because God loves, not the other way around. God makes this plain through Peter’s use of the passage of Joel. God is so holy and loving that God gives everyone, male and female, young and old, rich or poor, saved or “unsaved,” the ability to speak a word concerning God. In other words, God doesn’t discriminate on who can speak about godly matters. God’s ways are not our ways. Additionally, the natural world, which we often overlook, will also be filled with the power of the Spirit. In other words, God is in the process of doing something with all of creation. We should expect the unexpected. Not just in terms of signs and wonders, miracles and oracles, but also in the unexpected ways the non-human world can open us up to the reality of God.

Conversation

The awesome thing about Pentecost is not just that thousands of folks were added to the church that day—that indeed was magnificent—but what was also unprecedented was that God did something that we still have a hard time accepting. God gave everyone the spirit/ability to “speak a word” even if they don’t

belong to the church. God is not like us. God doesn't say because you are not an American citizen/saved, I don't have to be concerned about you. God doesn't separate families at the border because only some flesh is worthy of citizenship. God does not say that because of one's race, gender, sexuality, location, age, etc., that they are disqualified from speaking a word from God, even if some churches have yet to embrace that declaration. This outpouring of God's spirit is beyond the categories of "democracy," "equal opportunity," and/or "progressive politics." God pouring out the Spirit to everyone and upon all of creation is a gracious act of love and holiness. It cannot be domesticated or boxed in, just as God cannot be domesticated and boxed in.

So ultimately, the day/season of Pentecost was more than the occasion for Peter, in the power of the Spirit, to lead folks to Jesus and salvation. Pentecost also has the ability to save the church from doing what it and every other human institution has done throughout history: excluding some "flesh" from representing and speaking, and creating a pecking order on who can speak. But those are our ways. God's ways are not our ways. Pentecost not only gives us our marching orders to evangelize to others, but Pentecost reminds the church that it needs to be evangelized to as well. Pentecost reminds us about our call to spread the gospel and it reminds us about God's love and holiness.

Finally, a word of caution: while all are capable of speaking a word concerning God, that does not mean we allow, entertain, or applaud every kind of word to be spoken. Pentecost is not synonymous with freedom of speech. That is, no matter how crazy, hurtful, and death-dealing a word is, God has said "I can say it." No. What God has done, what God is doing, and what God will continue to do is give all flesh the ability to speak a word—a word of love, a word of grace, a word of life, a word of justice, a word of mercy, a prophetic word that cannot be bound by any person or institution. And if we can believe in a God who does this, we can be saved.

¹ We have often been taught that "different" is "better" or "deficient." We must be transformed and put down that understanding. Holiness exists beyond those categories. Functionally, holiness means to exist in a radically different way. The status quo says that different is "better or worse than." But if it's the status quo, it ain't holy.

² God's love embraces; it draws close and becomes a part of the world (creation and incarnation). God's love affirms; it lets us know that we are important to God, personally and collectively (calling and relationship). God's love challenges; it doesn't let us off the hook and asks us to examine ourselves, personally and collectively (repentance and forgiveness). God's love saves; it rescues and liberates us from the power of sin, brokenness, absurdity, and death (forgiveness, healing, purpose, and resurrection). God's love empowers; it frees us to participate with God in the creation of a holy and beloved community, i.e. the Kingdom of God.

Go and Make Students: Holistic or Emaciated Evangelism

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11 November 2018

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let us hear your call to make disciples with new ears. Help us to recognize the depth and challenge of the call to teach and observe your ways.

Scripture

Matthew 28:16-20

Contemporary Context

Many churches have excellent evangelism teams and remain committed to bringing the “lost” to Christ. And in the season of Pentecost, defining evangelism as an issue of the “soul” and not in terms of something more holistic and integral is a real temptation. Even our reading of Matthew’s “Great Commission” might suggest that Jesus wants us to save souls, even though the word “soul” is not found in this section of Matthew. Indeed, it may seem self-evident that the meaning of Jesus’ words refer to converting people to Christianity, saving their souls, and increasing church membership. But what does Matthew actually record? I think it would be helpful, though admittedly radical, to rethink and examine our reading of Matthew with fresh eyes. As Christians, we are often guilty of conflating texts to suit our theology and biases. As a theologian, Lord knows I’ve been tempted and have practiced conflation myself. But perhaps if we approach this text with a faithful and critical gaze, we can find a perspective that embraces not only matters of the soul, but also mental, emotional, physical, and social matters as well.

To be clear: I am not saying that evangelism has nothing to do with soul-work; I am saying that evangelism can be reduced to only “saving souls.” This reduction of evangelism is problematic. When this reduction becomes our entire sense of (co)mission, Christianity becomes a formula—not a way, a religion negotiates our relationships to God, each other, ourselves, and this world in which we live.

Exegesis

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written between 80-90 CE to a group of Jewish Christians, that is Jews who practiced Torah requirements and held that Jesus was the Messiah. Given the Jewishness of this particular gospel, Matthew develops themes that are unique to his gospel. For instance, and with respect to this Bible Study, scholars have noted that Matthew’s Jesus gives five speeches to his disciples for the purpose of instruction. Discourse 1 is found in Chapters 5-7 and is traditionally called “The Sermon on

the Mount.” This “Sermon” is a teaching on the present, on righteousness to God and neighbor in all areas of life. Discourse 2 is found in Chapter 10; it is an instruction on mission: the disciples and by extension the church are to follow the rules of engaging “the lost” set out by their master teacher. Discourse 3 is found in Chapter 13. These are Parables of the Kingdom, the central proclamation of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus gives instruction on the hidden meaning behind the Kingdom or Reign of God. Discourse 4 is found in Chapter 18 and concerns The Life of the Church and how members of the church should interact with one another. Discourse 5 covers Chapters 23-25: these are teachings on the future, woes, and the End. The final section of this discourse is the quintessential parable of the sheep and the goats—a parable found only in Matthew’s gospel. All five of these discourses end with the phrase “now when Jesus/he had finished saying these things...”. This cursory overview tells us many things, but for the sake of this lesson, let’s focus on one. Matthew’s Jesus is constantly and deliberately teaching his disciples about what it means to be his students.

Now to our text, Matthew 28:16-20: it’s important to note that the 11 disciples who meet Jesus on the mountain are a mixture of doubters and worshipers. This is actually an accurate representation of the church. But before we scold the doubters, let us note that the doubters still showed up to the mountain. Both the doubters and worshipers had traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee and up a mountain as Jesus had previously instructed. So those who doubted were not “doubters” in the absolute negative sense—i.e. a complete lack of faith. They were like the man with the epileptic child who cried out to Jesus, “I believe; Help my unbelief!” They are faithful skeptics, those kinds of students who are always asking questions. The worshipers, or faithful loyalists, were there too— those students who understood that sometimes trust is more important than critical distance. These two extremes—skeptics and worshipers—might represent a view of the church that seeks balance and admits reality. In other words, there is no one version of a disciple, and a healthy church runs the gamut from skeptic to loyalist. Thank you, Lawd!

Note the holistic approach to this section. 1) Skeptics and worshipers are present. 2) Jesus declares that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. 3) Jesus (in Matthew) does not instruct the disciples to baptize in the name of Jesus alone, but in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. 4) Jesus is not content with having the disciples only baptize; disciples must also make other students by way of teaching/instructing others in the way of Jesus. 5) The disciples are not left alone on this journey. Jesus is with them/us. In other words, this section is full of both/ands rather than either/ors. Disciples are not either worshipers or skeptics. They are both worshipers and skeptics. Jesus doesn’t have power in either heaven or earth. He has authority in both heaven and on earth. Most mysteriously and paradoxically of all, disciples do not simply baptize in one name, but in one name that contains three persons. And finally, disciples don’t go out into the age alone; Jesus is our traveling buddy—O Hallelujah!

Jesus told the disciples to go and make more students. This is not biblical literalism. The next clause demonstrates the pedagogical force of the commission to make more students. The old disciples (students) are to make new students by and through TEACHING. They are to teach new students the ways of the Master Teacher.

Conversation

A large swath of Christianity was introduced to African slaves by Europeans who dedicated themselves to saving “souls,” even though they had little to no regard for following the command to see their Master Teacher in the “least of these.” Yet, their tactic was a form of evangelism—violent, emaciated evangelism. This is why Matthew’s Jesus warns us that “not everyone who says ‘Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” but only those who do God’s will—only those who learn and practice the ways of the teacher. In other words, the nations don’t simply need conversion; they also require instruction and a sense of community. Evangelism that begins and ends with the soul but cares nothing for learning the ways of Jesus is, in the final analysis, no different from the slave master’s religion—an emaciated,

bankrupt, ungodly knock-off of Jesus' way. Matthew's Jesus reminds us that evangelism must be holistic. Evangelism—sharing the good news of the Kingdom of God and Jesus—should lead to conversion, discipleship, and membership.¹

Jesus sends us to make students. Students are to make more students. We are learners who follow the master teacher. And learners need both a healthy skepticism (doubt) and obedience (worship) in order to truly evangelize... in order to truly change and instruct the mind, heart, body, and soul—the whole—of the nations. And the promise is true. Jesus walks with us on this journey.

Questions

Many “Evangelical” Christians unrepentantly side with a man who claims he’s never asked for forgiveness, who constantly lies and disparages, and who authors policies that separate families. While there may be some question as to whether or not these particular “evangelicals” have actually converted, there should be no question that they are lacking in discipleship. If their hearts, minds, and practice are windows into their souls, then something terrible has truly taken place.

1. What do you think explains this?
2. Also, can you identify other or similar pitfalls in reducing evangelism to only one category?

¹ I've developed more detailed look into conversion, discipleship, and membership in some of my other writings. If anyone would like to take a look, please let me know. I don't mean this to be a shameless plug, but I want to stay on task with this Bible Study.

Amazing Grace

*Mrs. Mary Mayo Mayberry
President, 5th Episcopal District Women's
Missionary Society*

18 November 2018

Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power. We thank and praise you God, for being a God of infinite grace. We thank you God, for your benevolence. We thank you God, for your mercy, for forgiving us time after time for walking outside of your wish and will for our lives. We are but lowly sinners, saved by your grace. When we've lost our way, when we've let go of your guiding hand, when we've tried to do things our own way instead of following your direction, we thank you God, for your protection. We thank you God for your steadfast love for us. No matter what we could ever do, your Word says that we are forgiven for our misdoings. We stand on every promise you make to us through your Word: that you would never leave us or forsake us, that you would shelter us from the storms yet to come. It is only because of your grace that we can face each new day that you grant us, secure in the knowledge that you have a plan for us, to shield us from all hurt, harm and danger, to give us hope and a future. Thank you for being the One who provides. Thank you for being the One who heals. Thank you for being the One who protects. Thank you for being the God of peace. We give you all praise. In your Son, Jesus' name we pray, AMEN

Scripture

Psalm 16

Contemporary Context

Have you ever embarked on a journey, certain of your destination, only to discover you were lost? How did you feel? Angry? Scared? Anxious? Confused? What did you do? Did you continue your way in the hope that you would somehow find your way to your intended destination? Did you try to redirect your course in the hope that you would get back on track? Or, did you try to find someone to ask for direction? Or perhaps you tried to find a roadmap to find your way?

Today, modern technology has blessed us with a device known as a global positioning system or GPS. It is a satellite navigation system used to determine the ground position of an object. GPS technology was first used by the United States military in the 1960s and expanded into civilian use over the next few decades. Today, GPS receivers are included in many commercial products, such as automobiles, smartphones, exercise watches, and other devices.

Each GPS satellite broadcasts a message that includes the satellite's current position, orbit, and exact time. A GPS receiver combines the broadcasts from multiple satellites to calculate its exact position using a process called triangulation. Three satellites are required to determine a receiver's location. These satellites combined determine the location and send a signal back to Earth to your device, to let you know exactly where you are in relation to the rest of the world.

Exegesis

Psalm 16 speaks to David's desire to always put God first in his life, and the consequences and pitfalls to be experienced when that plan is not followed. The Psalm begins (verses 1-7) with David's outpouring of love, respect and admiration of God, and his declaration of God's importance in his life. David speaks to the fact that those who choose to follow the teaching of the Lord are the ones who are rewarded with a prosperous existence, while those who choose not to honor the Lord are destined to live a life of extreme sadness and loss. In verses 8-11, David continues to describe the benefits of his decision to always put the Lord first (Psalm 16:8). This decision brought a great deal of happiness to David's life.

Peter speaks to these verses in Acts 2:25-28 which talk about the day of Pentecost. Peter tells us directly of David's deep devotion to God, and how he depends upon God's grace to provide for his needs and give him direction in his quest to live a life that would be pleasing in His sight.

For those who do not live out a true commitment to God, it is easy for them to think of what such a commitment costs them. This is not entirely bad, because this kind of decision- to always put the Lord first- comes at a cost, and the cost should be "counted and appreciated". It may cost certain pleasures, popularity, anonymity, family relationships, life goals, career choices, and/or financial priorities. Yet David also tells us some of the benefits of such a life decision: "my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices" (verse 9). There was happiness and glory David knew by this life commitment that he would not have known otherwise.

David could comprehend both the costs and the benefits, and rejoice in the knowledge of his decision. It also resulted in the realization of the confidence of God's promise of a life after death. David had the promise of the hope that God would not leave his soul in the grave (Sheol), but that his life would continue in the presence of God into eternity.

David realized that he could experience joy in the presence of God immediately by making the decision to follow Him, to love Him above all, and to serve Him. He had full confidence that his life with God – both now and forever–would be reflected in the kind of life that only God could provide, if he placed his full trust in Him. This tells us that both in this life and the life beyond, true happiness can be found in the presence of God, not in separation from Him.

The conclusion of this Psalm is especially impactful when we consider how it began. When we go back to the first verse, we remember that this life filled with joy will not experience its share of trials and tribulations. There will be challenges along the way. His promise is that while life may have its difficulties, in the end it will all be worth it.

Conversation

Through an outpouring of God's amazing grace, He gives each one of us a GPS as a means of watching over us and giving us a way back to Him. The three satellites, the "triangulation" - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit- combine to comprise our guiding force. With this GPS we can never really be lost to Him, unless we choose to disconnect from the GPS. Too often, we choose to turn our backs on God, or foolishly try to hide from him, thinking that he can't see us when we sin. Thankfully, each time we sin or fall short, God showers us with even more grace to get us back on track.

In a now famous speech, President Barack Obama during his eulogy for the Late Rev. Clementa Pinckney had this to say about grace, "...God has visited grace upon us for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we have been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have

earned it, the grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short sightedness and fear of each other-but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He's once more given us grace."

That's the kind of God we serve. Even after one of the most heinous acts committed by a human being, God was there ready to show us his compassion and benevolence. When we place all our trust in Him to provide guidance through the journey called life, we can rest in the realization that we can never be out of His sight. To those who mourn he provides comfort. To those who are confused he provides enlightenment. To those who are scared he provides protection. To those who are anxious he provides peace. To those who are lost he provides direction, back to God.

Questions

1. How do I express my love for Christ in my daily activities? Are they obvious to others?
2. In Psalm 16, what is David saying about his relationship to God and its impact on his existence?
3. What are some of the benefits we can derive from putting God first, especially considering the circumstances we now find ourselves facing in the 21st century?

Media

"Amazing Grace"

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch; like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

The Lord hath promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

Your Kingdom Come

Rev. Mary S. Minor, D. Min.

Pastor, Brookins-Kirkland Community

AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)

25 November 2018

Prayer

God, we thank You for being a God of promise. We thank You for Your constant reminders that You are always with us — no matter where we are. Let Your Holy Spirit teach us how to wait patiently for Jesus' return and His reign. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Amen!

Scripture

Daniel 7:9-14; Revelation 1:4b-8

Contemporary Context

The Season of Pentecost evokes a message of fulfilled promises. Jesus promised his disciples he would send them another Comforter, since he was going away (John 16:7). Again, after His resurrection, Jesus gave them the command to “wait for the gift my Father promised” (Acts 1:4, NIV). Thus, Pentecost reminds us of God's perpetual presence in the form of God's Divine Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the author of Divine prophecies: “For prophecy never had its origin in the¹ human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21, NIV). Even in arduous times — exile, isolation, prison, jail, facing persecution and/or execution — the Lord never leaves us or forsakes us. The Holy Spirit is ever present!

Exegesis

The Old Testament book of Daniel, as well as, the New Testament book of Revelation both contain apocalyptic (revelatory) literature, which is symbolic, visionary, prophetic literature. Daniel is the author of the book bearing his name. Jesus concurred, as evidenced by his reference to ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel (Matthew 24:15).² The apostle John is credited the authorship of the book of Revelation.

Daniel, a Hebrew young man, was carried from Jerusalem to Babylon exile during the reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judah. He was one of the “young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace” (Daniel 1:4, NIV). Daniel was acculturated in the Babylonian language and customs for three years. His name was changed from Daniel to Belteshazzar. He was assigned a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. However, Daniel resolved not to eat food and wine from the king's table because it had been offered to idols and poured out on a pagan altar. Daniel had the courage of his conviction by asking permission not to defile himself this way.

God revealed mysteries to Daniel through visions and dreams. The kings of Babylon had dreams that Daniel interpreted, and the dreams were fulfilled. In the first year of Belshazzar, King of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed (Daniel 7:1, NIV). Daniel dreamt about the rise and fall of world political powers: (1) a Neo-Babylonian empire would rise; (2) a Medo-Persian alliance; (3) Alexander the Great's empire would rise and fall; (4) the Roman Empire; and (5) the antichrist, or a world power sharing in the characteristics of the antichrist. Yet, when the "Ancient of Days" appeared, the antichrist was "destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire" (Daniel 7:11). Then the one like the son of man appeared and "he was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him" (Daniel 7:14).

While exiled on the island of Patmos during a time when Christians were persecuted, John encouraged Christians to remain faithful. The Holy Spirit revealed to John that the final showdown between God and Satan was imminent. Nevertheless, "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:7-8).

Conversation

It is said that the Old Testament conceals and the New Testament reveals mysteries in God's word. The book of Daniel provides a prelude of God's ultimate plan, and the book of Revelation illuminates the entire plan of God. In Daniel's dream, there was the appearance of one like the son of man. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' most common title for himself, "Son of man" is used 81 times in the Gospels. Elsewhere, it is used by Stephen (Acts 7:56) and in John's vision (Revelation 1:13).³

The people of God have this blessed assurance that one day there will be "a new heaven and a new earth." God's dwelling place will be among the people of God, and God will dwell with God's people. Since we are the people of God, God will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away. We who are victorious will inherit all this, and God will be our God and we will be God's children (Revelation 21:1-7).

Questions

1. Does the manner in which the people of Judah were carried into Babylon slavery evoke thoughts of W. E. DuBois' concept of "The Talented Tenth"? (Read 2 Kings 24:12b - 17)
2. Do you have the courage of your conviction to speak truth to power regarding societal injustices?
3. Does God still speak through visions and dreams? What is God's method of communication?
4. What do you know about the Holy Spirit? Have you experienced a personal pentecost?
5. In the New York Times article, "Inside the Confidential NFL Meeting to Discuss National Anthem Protests", will the player representatives have courage of their convictions to stand up to the NFL owners? <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/sports/nfl-owners-kaepernick.html>
6. How do you remain fearless in the face of the Trump Administration's policies?
7. In today's modern context, could the four political powers in Daniel's dream be named as (1) Russia, (2) China, (3) North Korea, and (4) South Korea? Could America, under the Trump Administration, be the little horn — a world power sharing in the characteristics of the antichrist?

¹ R. A. Torrey, *The person and work of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Scriptures and in personal experience 1* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 13.

² Kenneth L. Baker, (General Editor) and John H. Stek, Mark L. Strauss, Ronald F. Youngblood (Associate 2 Editors), "Daniel," in *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 1311.

³ Kenneth L. Baker, (General Editor) and John H. Stek, Mark L. Strauss, Ronald F. Youngblood (Associate 3 Editors), "Mark," note on 8:31 in *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 1583.

Come, Holy Spirit

Ms. Pamela Williams

*President, Missouri Conference Lay
Organization*

02 December 2018

Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all Thy quickening powers; kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours. AMEN.

Scripture

John 16:12-15 (NIV)

Exegesis

Jesus is understood to say that he would continue to speak to the Twelve, at least, after his return to the Father. He would do this through the Holy Spirit whom he was going to send. Revelation could potentially continue until the death of the last apostle. Although it is possible that an audience broader than the Twelve is addressed, this seems unlikely in context since other statements made by Jesus appear to be directed to those present when he spoke.

When the Holy Spirit comes, he will guide the disciples into all the truth. What Jesus said in 8:31-32, “If you remain in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” will ultimately be realized in the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit to the disciples after Jesus’ departure.

The things the Holy Spirit speaks to them will not be things which originate from himself, but things he has heard. Part, at least, of what the Holy Spirit will reveal to the disciples will concern things to come, not just fuller implications of previous sayings of Jesus and the like. But the Spirit is not the source or originator of these things—Jesus is the source, and he will continue to speak to his disciples through the Spirit who has come to dwell in them.

Conversation

Jesus went to prepare a place for us. He sent the Holy Spirit to comfort us in His absence and to prepare us for that place He has gone to prepare. The Spirit was given to guide us in truth, to show us the way we are to go, to remind us of the promises Jesus gave us.

Jesus says in vv 12-13 that He has more to tell us, but we are unable to bear it, so He sent the Spirit of truth to us. But the Spirit will not be speaking on his own, but will tell us what he hears from Jesus. He goes on to explain to us in vv 14-15 that the Spirit will glorify Him because once he hears from Jesus, he will pass that knowledge on to us.

It is our job to pray and listen to the Spirit for guidance and direction. In order to hear the Spirit, we must humble ourselves and be still (quiet); be prepared (study the word and meditate on it day and night); be patient (God does not always send the answer we are seeking, but we must be willing to wait on the Lord and be of good courage).

Once we hear from the Spirit, we must then take the time to thank God for the message, even when we don't think we like what we hear. God is always on time and His goal is never to harm us. If he doesn't give us something we want or gives us something we don't think we want, it will turn out, in time, to be very good for us (And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28)

Study the word, meditate on it day and night. Talk to God and listen to His responses. Learn to recognize the voice of Jesus so that when the Holy Spirit talks to you, you will know from where the voice is coming.

Questions

1. How do you invite the presence of the Holy Spirit?
2. How do you recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit?
3. Have you grieved the Holy Spirit in any way? If so, how? If so, have you asked for and/or been restored?

Who Do We Say We Are?

*Rev. Mark Whitlock, Jr., M.Div., MSSE
Pastor, Christ Our Redeemer AMEC (Irvine,
CA)*

09 December 2018

Prayer

Dear God: in Jesus Christ, help us to remember!

Scripture

Mark 8:27-38

Contemporary Context

Who is the Black Church? Who do we say we are? We are living in era where the tears of suffering souls stain the face of the Statue of Liberty. An unarmed Black man alone, in his one-bedroom apartment one block from the Dallas Police Department headquarters is shot and killed by a female police officer. Immigration patrol officers steal babies from the arms of mothers to never be seen again. An orange marmalade, melodramatic, television reality show, want-to-be actor who openly supports “very fine people” like neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, neo-Confederates, Holocaust deniers, and Alt Right White Supremacists, is elected to live in the White House.

Where is the suffering Black church while all of this is happening? Who do we say we are? Have we fallen into the ploy of hoping for a militaristic messiah commissioned to combat corrupt politicians and slim shady super villains in blue super suits masquerading as so called super peace officers? Who do we say we are? Have we stopped marching for civil rights, protesting unjust public policies, and preaching biblical social justice messages? Who do we say we are? Have we moved so far away from the principles of African Methodism, that Richard and Sarah Allen would not know us? Jesus sits in the alcove on Sunday raising the question...who do you say the AME Church is?

Exegesis

Jesus secretly slips away on a ministerial retreat to Caesarea Philippi. A city named after a King Phillip- the weak brother of King Herod Antipas, and Herodias- King Phillip’s ex-wife. The town is a place where pagan idols are worshipped, great political corruption, and emperor worship was the order of the day. Jesus asks an existential question to the future leaders of the church: to identify who He is. Only Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is as surprised as Peter. Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone about what Peter has said. He taught them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter is shocked at what Jesus says. Peter rebuked Jesus. Peter treated Jesus like a demon. Peter truly believed that Jesus was the new King David, a war king.

The Jews shared in the same hope for a militaristic superman to defeat Rome. The idea of a suffering servant was radically new. Jesus challenges them to join a new revolutionary religion by taking up their personal cross. The cross is not an expensive ornament worn on a gold chain, but the symbol of a revolutionary religion established to challenge oppressive oligarchies, misogynistic ministers, and the

privatization of prosperity pulpits. He is calling for them to come out of themselves to the greater self of God. He is calling them to become comfortable being uncomfortable. Jesus instructs believers to deny themselves by turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness and turning to a God-centeredness.

God's people were addicted to the idolatry of materialism, sexual lust, and lack of compassion for the least of these. It is a clarion call to die to the person in the mirror. "One cannot try to be a martyr," Karl Barth remarked. "One can only be ready to be made a martyr." Jesus commissioned them to love thy neighbor in radical submission to an almighty loving God. A radical suffering servant has compassion and commitment to pastoral care through the lens of social justice. We are expected to follow the ways of Jesus. Jesus says, "Are you ashamed of me?" We are called to be faithful and assured, in the words of Tertullian, who wrote amid persecution in the late second century, "I am safe, if I am not ashamed of my Lord." Do we really love the suffering servant or superman-like savior in a red cape?

Conversation

Have we forgotten who the Black Church is? The Black Church has been the repository for social justice, civil rights, and a meeting place for community action. Have we forgotten how to mobilize God's people to stand up for justice? Politicians, organized civic, social, sorority and fraternal organizations, and the grass roots activists met at the church. Have we become too old to march, write, speak, and hear the groans of God's children? Jesus teaches us to suffer for the people. Who is suffering to make a measurable difference for souls living in America?

Questions

1. Who do they say the Black Church is?
2. Who do you say the Black Church is?
3. How do you define suffering for God's people?
4. Have we become so mainstream that social relevance is inconsequential?
5. How do we reimagine the AME Church?
6. What are you willing to do to transform the AME Church?
7. What and where is your cross?
8. Are you ashamed to be like Jesus?

Experiencing Spiritual Renewal: Take Off The Masks!

*Rev. Mark Whitlock, Jr., M.Div., MSSE
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CA)*

16 December 2018

Prayer

Dear God: open minds and mouth for truth to be heard.

Scripture

Luke 3:7-18

Contemporary Context

Church leaders, pew partners, and the larger community of believers are at risk of suffering from spiritual malnutrition. We wear spiritual masks hiding mutilated and emaciated souls. We have become too busy to meditate on God's word, too proud to publicly repent of sins, too deaf to hear God's voice and too stubborn to do anything about it.

The ekklēsia has been muted by spiritual defiance, social indifference, declining church membership and dwindling offerings. The people of the Sacred Way have lost their way, searching for a new way, or have chosen to ignore God's way. Muted are the voices crying from the wilderness for women who have been sexually assaulted, Black men wrongfully incarcerated, opiate-addicted children, compassion fatigued clergy, and insensitive plutocrats funded by political oligarchies. Who is willing to take the risk of faith to speak truth to power, demand accountability, and call for public repentance of sin?

Exegesis

John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, a moral voice crying in the wilderness for public and private repentance, forgiveness of sin, and a crusader for a radical re-imagination of religion, challenges the status quo. He is a non-ordained lay preacher unafraid to speak truth to power to the crowd, tax collectors, cops, and clerics profiting from God's resources. He stands at the Baptism font waiting for sinners to be baptized. John the Baptist called for spiritual renewal by way of a water baptism, but prophesied that Jesus Christ would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. The keepers of the God's Law, the Pharisees criticized John the Baptist as a hermit heretic. They refused to participate in the process of spiritual renewal by coming out of themselves into the greater self of God. Judah suffered from spiritual malnutrition. They practiced a form of religion, but denied the power of God. John the Baptist called them out!

Conversation

First, we must admit things are not working. God is calling for clergy, church officers, and pew partners to a renewed focus on pastoral care ministry in the church. Let us return to the basics of scheduling morning devotion to include praying, reading scriptures, singing of hymns, and meditating on God's word. Let us return to caring for the hungry, naked, and homeless. Let us be committed to speaking truth to power to elected and civic government officials, bias policing, ill-prepared teachers, inept school administrators, and the church leadership without fear of retaliation, reprisal, and loss of social status and employment. Let us learn to define pastoral care through the lens of social justice, love of neighbor, evangelism, preaching, teaching, counseling, and serving the community needs. Let us listen to reimagine the AME Church. We are the change we need to experience.

Questions

1. How do you recognize the symptoms of spiritual malnutrition?
2. What are the signs of an unauthentic worship service?
3. How may our dreams and aspirations find freedom from traps designed to maintain dead practices?
4. How may we empower millennials and Gen. Z to help energize a spiritual renewal movement?
5. What will it require to delete anger and bitterness from the church menu?
6. Applying the spiritual renewal process to our lives:
 - Begin the day and end the day with spiritual devotion: Read one book of Proverbs daily, sing a hymn, pray, and meditate for five minutes.
 - Bring a close friend to worship service.
 - Attend a weekly Bible Study.
 - Speak the truth in all cases.
 - Listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. Take a risk of faith to do what the Holy Spirit instructs.
 - Think of yourself as a Christian. At what stage are you? Are you wearing a mask that grins and smiles? Take off the mask to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. (Allow spontaneous sharing.)

Pregnant With Praise

Rev. Ann Champion Shaw

Asst. Pastor, Bethel AMEC (San Francisco, CA)

23 December 2018

Prayer

JESUS--Our hearts overflow with adoration for you. From the fruit of our lips, we honor and exalt you for all of your blessings. Most of all, Thank you for coming in this world to save us from our sins. ---In Your Holy Name AMEN

Scripture

Luke 1:46b—55

Contemporary Context

For many, pregnancy is a time of excitement and great expectation in preparing to welcome ‘new life’ into this world. Persons are filled with immense joy and gladness with every movement that comes from the unborn child.

Exegesis

Here we read and hear the Virgin Mary’s song of Praise a.k.a ‘The Magnificat’ in her response to being pregnant with the Savior Jesus. Within Mary’s song, we also hear the hidden song of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel who in the Old Testament, we find in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 offering praise to God for blessing her womb with a son. We even have a third woman, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth who joins in the ‘Praise Party.’ In our text, Mary is at the home of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah who live in the country of Judea and are expecting their first born child. Luke 1:41 tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s baby “leaped in her womb” and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth even offered blessings exclaiming, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” This Holy confirmation of being pregnant with the Savior was so overwhelming that Mary offered God great Praise!

Conversation

This was not your ordinary pregnancy. Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus would go beyond herself and bless all those who came near her. Inside Mary’s womb was more than just a baby, it was praise because of God’s favor upon her in choosing her to be Jesus’ mother. As an average pregnancy term is nine months before the baby is delivered, here in our text, we find 9 verses of praise delivered by Mary that not only exalt what God has done in her and through her, but also exclaim the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God who has and will always protect and care for his children both now and in generations to come.

Questions

1. When was the last time you and others only spoke of God's blessings? How did you and others feel while sharing?
2. What gifts live inside of you that can be a blessing to someone else?
3. What miracle has God performed in you and through you? Mary offered her song of praise, have you offered yours? If not, try it now. Watch what happens.
4. #WhenPraisesGoUpBlessingsComeDown

Turn The Light On

Rev. Robert R. Shaw

Pastor, Bethel AMEC (San Francisco, CA)

30 December 2018

Prayer

Lord God we thank you for being the light that shines within our hearts. Please give us a boldness to spread your light to others in this dying world. In Jesus Name--AMEN

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2-7

Contemporary Context

It can be quite frustrating to maneuver throughout your home with no lights. If ever in this situation, one can stumble, fall, and even injure themselves and others because no light is present. When entering our home, it is necessary for one to ‘Turn the lights on’ in order for us to see and be safe in our movement.

Exegesis

Here in our text, we find the Messianic prophet Isaiah speaking to the Israelites who were in “darkness” as exiles during the Babylonian captivity. In this text, he offers hope and restoration to a people who have suffered and been abused by the Babylonian oppressors. What joy as well as high expectations must have been felt by the Israelites in receiving the great news that their ‘dark period’ was only temporary, and that one day, a Messiah would come into this world and turn the light on in their heart, making them new and whole.

Conversation

We, as Believers know that the ‘Great Light’ that Isaiah speaks of in Isaiah 9:2 is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We received this light when we gave our life to Jesus Christ and it is because of his light that we are forever transformed. Often, we encounter persons who stumble and fall in the dark due to personal, emotional, social, and political ills. Not having Christ in their life, these persons feel stuck in a space of hopelessness and despair. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 5:16 to “Let our light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven.” The only light of Christ that people might see is through our story and our service. By sharing the ‘Good News’ with others, we are spreading joy, bringing hope to the hopeless, and transforming lives forever. Ultimately, Jesus’ desire for us is to turn people on to HIS light and HIS love.

Questions

1. What have been some dark places in your life that Jesus brought you out of?
2. When was the last time you shared this story with someone? What happened as a result?
3. What are some things that prevent us as Christians from evangelizing to others?

Who Am I?

Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.

Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)

06 January 2019

Prayer

I am that I am: please clarify who You are so that we might better understand who we are; clarify for us who we are – individually and collectively – so that we might better understand who You are. Please perform this in Your perfect timing, will, and way. Strengthen us in who we are that we might be individual and collective blessings to Your creation – including all Your children. We pray this in Jesus’s name – and in the name of all that is holy. Amen.

Scripture

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Matthew 25:31-46

Contemporary Context

From late September to early October 2018 the nomination and confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh was derailed in the wake of allegations of multiple occasions of his committing acts of sexual assault and/or aggression. Following the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, many women reported having heard this testimony and being triggered (i.e., reminded of their own experiences of sexual assault – reported and unreported). This case, reminiscent of the nomination and confirmation of Clarence Thomas in the wake of Anita Hill’s allegation, commands the attention of people from diverse walks of life – and especially commands the attention of those who identify as men or women in distinctive ways respectively. These allegations have evoked terror for the countless women who have experienced some form of sexual assault;¹ these allegations have evoked terror for men whose sexual aggressions have gone unchecked. For men, women, and others, this is a context that calls upon each of us to reconsider who we are – and who we are to one another. If and when we see that we have not been good to one another, we must begin to rework ourselves into a “who” that we, our communities in their most just state, and God can approve.

Exegesis

The author of Ecclesiastes has ideas about what distinguishes human beings from other beings: “I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” (v. 10-11). However, he also understands that a significant truth of human existence is the variability of human experience. While he does suggest that our experiences change our identities, he does take the changes of human conditions according to variable of time quite seriously, noting that there is “. . . a time to kill and a time to heal, . . . a time to mourn and a time to dance.” The author of Psalm 8 also has a sense of the particularity of humanity. Bracketed with declarations of the majesty of the Lord, “our Lord,” are the psalmist’s musings: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.” (v. 4-5). In both Ecclesiastes 3 and Psalm 8 there is a

clarity that the greatness of God is beyond comprehension or expression in words or in time – and human beings (though not that great) are pretty great too.

The ideal expression of this human greatness, however, is distinctively expressed in Ecclesiastes 3 and Psalm 8. The psalmist continues to explain human greatness in this way: “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (v. 6). The writer of Ecclesiastes, alternatively, explains human greatness in this way: “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live” (v. 12). Then, there is the account of Jesus’s words in Matthew 25. Through this text often identified as the “Judgment of Nations,” it seems that Jesus is clarifying both who he is and who human beings are – and which human beings or human beings who endure which kinds of conditions are closest in experience and/or identity to his (i.e., Jesus’s) own. The writer records a narrative in Jesus’s voice about the “Son of Man” coming in his glory as “King” and distinguishing those approved by his “Father.” The approved are those who met the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. Matthew 25 records: “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’” (40). Human greatness is thus expressed in and through both identification with and care for “the least.”

Conversation

Identity politics have been defined in a variety of ways. The two definitions that surface first in a Google search of the same are the following: (1) “a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics”; (2) “Identity politics are political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify. Identity politics includes the ways in which people's politics are shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations.”² Identity politics matter and play out insofar as any one and/or group of us has a sense of who she, he, we, and/or they are. One of the most complicated aspects of living as people of faith in difficult times – times that include challenges to our traditional social, religious, and political commitments as our identities and/or experience are invoked or evoked in the public sphere – is remembering all of who we are and how who we are matters and must matter to the ways we believe and act in our homes, churches, jobs, and civic engagements.

Questions

1. When you ask yourself the question: “who am I?” how do you respond? Is your answer different in different contexts? If so, how and why? If not, how and why not?
2. What are your greatest characteristics or features? In what ways are you privileged?
3. What areas of your life experience or identity are challenging for you? In what ways are you “the least”?
4. Who has God shown Godself to be in your life? How does who and how God is inform who and how you are?
5. How do you honor the various aspects of your identities (i.e., as daughter, son, mother, father, brother, sister, other, significant other, spouse, friend, pastor, presiding elder, bishop, leader, member, officer, doctor, lawyer, housekeeper, childcare provider, food service, retail worker, and/or voter, etc.)? Which of your identities and/or aspects of your identity prevail? Why?

Media

<https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

¹ “One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives”; “In the U.S., one in three women and one in six men experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime”
<https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

² https://www.google.com/search?q=identity+politics&rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS813US813&oq=identity+politics&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.5135j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

We Can't Handle the Holy Ghost

*Rev. Francine Brookins, J.D., M.Div.
Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

13 January 2019

Prayer

Lord, teach us to be available to You. As we study today show Yourself through each person gathered and let us come taste and see how, where and when the Holy Spirit is moving among us. Do not let us be afraid in Jesus name, amen.

Scripture

John 16:12-15

Contemporary Context

I believe that many people join a church and that is the end of their intentional spiritual growth. They start coming to a building on Sunday morning where we talk and sing about Jesus, and then they leave and go about their everyday lives. Learning how to study the Bible, how to engage in prayer, and how to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit are not part of the average curriculum. We don't do a great job of making disciples and people don't necessarily seek to become disciples on their own. Even those who followed Jesus were hard to disciple. Disciple means student. Students must be willing to learn. Many of us are not open to learning the things of God... we are only interested in confirming what we think we already know. In order to be used by God, we must be open and available to things we don't already know.

Exegesis

In our text Jesus is getting ready to be killed, resurrected and then ascend to sit at the right hand of God the Father almighty. He wants to share some things with the disciples about the future, but in vs. 12 he says that knows they can't yet 'handle/bear/accept/understand' what he has for them. He wants to teach them about the Holy Spirit. He wants to show them how he must leave in order for the Holy Spirit, Advocate, Paraclete to be released to do its work in the believer and in the world. He wants them to understand that the Holy Spirit will:

- Convict the unrepentant heart of sin;
- Teach us what we do not know;
- Tell us what to say and when/how to say it;
- Prepare us for the future;
- Guide us

We can see the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in and between human beings in Acts 8:26-38 when Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch on the road and when Peter is sent to Cornelius in Acts 10-11:18. In each case, believers were called upon by the Holy Spirit to teach and to share in ways that they had not previously. God did a new thing in them and they were open to receive it.

Conversation

The Holy Spirit moves among us. It talks to us. It guides us. It teaches us. All of those things are possible only if 1) we believe it exists; and 2) we are humble enough to be used. We can't learn if we think we know everything. We can't be used if we are full of pride and ego. The Holy Spirit does not operate under our control. We are not in charge of it. We don't say when the wind should blow, or how it should blow, or on whom it should blow. Same with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit starts moving and we anchor down, hold on to our seats, shut our mouths and try to make sure it does not touch us. But what would happen if those who believe just let the Holy Spirit have it's way?

Questions

1. When was the last time you believe you were used by the Holy Spirit? Discuss.
2. Have you ever seen anyone quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19-20)? Have you ever quenched the Holy Spirit? What does it feel like? What might be the result of quenching the Spirit?
3. Does the Holy Spirit use men, women and children all the same or is it free to move more among one of those groups? Why or why not?
4. Take time to pray as a group that each member of your church and your ministry staff will be available to the Holy Spirit in a new way in this season of Pentecost. Pray that God will open eyes and hearts to expect and to see miracles, signs and wonders.

Media

“Lord, I’m Available to You” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJznj1a8I1w>

Get Out!

*Rev. Francine Brookins, J.D., M.Div.
Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Fontana, CA)*

20 January 2019

Prayer

God who knows us better than we know ourselves, change us as we study Your word today. Create in us a clean spirit, one that wants to be made whole, no matter what the cost. We ask in the powerful and victorious name of Jesus, the King of Kings. Amen.

Scripture

Luke 8:26-39

Contemporary Context

Sickness and isolation fill us and surround us. As people of color we are suffering from Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder and many other forms of mental illness. There is simply no way to process the multitude of assaults that are coming against people in black and brown bodies. And it is not just racism, it is classism. The gap between the have's and the have-not's continues to grow. Those who started out with one sandwich are down to a cracker. The homeless population continues to explode so that more and more people are displaced and isolated. Do you know what it feels like to be told you don't belong and that there is no place for you?

Exegesis

In our text, Jesus is led towards a man we are told is filled with demons. He tells Jesus to leave him alone. He presents much like many of the homeless people we encounter... shouting and rambling... sometimes making sense to others, sometimes not. He does not want to be touched. He perceives that Jesus will change his life and circumstances and he is not interested in change or transformation. He has many problems. Jesus asks him to identify himself and he says he is legion (an army of 6000). In biblical times, the degree of mental illness was measured by the number of demons living in the sufferer. So Mary Magdalene was said to have seven demons, but the demoniac says he has 6000! He is telling Jesus, "I am deeply troubled. I don't even know who I am anymore." What a confession! Jesus then casts those 6000 troubles out of him and they run into some pigs who then kill themselves. The townspeople are upset that the pigs have been destroyed and they ask Jesus to please leave. He sends the man who has been healed and delivered to go be a messenger of the good news in the town. Even though the man was healed, they lost valuable property. They were afraid of what else might happen if Jesus stayed in town.

Conversation

We can tell Jesus the truth about our situations. We can confess: "I am legion. I am sick. I have made and still make bad choices. I do my best to avoid others so they won't know how bad my situation is. I've been through some things and I did not come out whole, I am broken and wounded." We can tell Jesus the truth about our situations. Sometimes, that is all we need in order to be healed: someone trustworthy to share with; and the feeling that we are still loved once we have been seen, heard and known for who we really are.

Not everyone will be pleased about our healing. Sometimes others have come to depend on us being sick. Sometimes our deliverance changes the communities in which we live, work and worship. It forces other people to become more authentic and truthful.

Questions

1. When was the last time you had an honest talk with Jesus about your troubles?
2. If you knew that you could heal others simply by spending time with them would you do it?
3. Have you ever felt isolated and alone? Did you want others to come in or did you push them away?
4. How do you feel about mental illness? Do you believe it can be treated? How?
5. Take time to pray together as a Bible Study class that real healing will begin to take place in your congregation. Pray that people will be open to telling the truth and that others will provide powerful, loving, listening, and presence in support. Ask God to cast out all the demons in every persons gathered and to send them into the sea. Ask God to fill each of you with the Holy Spirit so there is no room for demons to live inside.

Free to Love

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.

Pastor, Allen Chapel AMEC (Riverside, CA)

27 January 2019

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the freedom we have in Christ. May your Holy Spirit help us to demonstrate our love for You by serving You and serving humanity.

Scripture

Galatians 5:1; 13-25

Contemporary Context

For the contemporary context, let me summarize with an illustration regarding a marriage: The husband requested that his wife fulfill certain duties in the marriage, which he had in the form of a list that he presented to his wife. The wife resented his requests and it caused an extreme amount of tension in the marriage. One day, the husband died and a few years later, the wife re-married. Her new husband loved her dearly and demonstrated his love for her daily, and she loved him in return. One day when going through some old items in her house, the wife stumbled across the “list of requests” from her previous husband. What she discovered was that she was gladly fulfilling these items with her current husband, not out of obligation, but out of love for her husband, because he loved her so much and demonstrated that love daily.

Please do not dismiss this illustration because of the appearance of traditional, out of date, requests by the husband, and miss the point of the illustration. When demands/requests were not present in the second marriage, and love was demonstrated, the wife found that she expressed her love by freely giving to her second husband everything that the first husband requested. She was free to love.

Exegesis

In Galatians 5:1, the text states when we accept Christ as Lord and Savior, we are free from the enslaving power of the law, and admonished not to become burdened by a yoke of slavery again. For anyone who really understands this type of freedom it is actually liberating! In Christ, we are free! There is no condemnation for us (Romans 8:1). But the question that needs to be asked is: what do we do with this freedom? Do we indulge in anything we want? Is our freedom a license to partake in the desires of the flesh? No, this is not the approach of the believer. The believer with his/her freedom serves Christ in love, by serving each other in love. This is commitment! To love Christ is to be committed to Christ, and the Holy Spirit will now guide you in the ways of Christ as we serve each other.

Verse 16 calls the believer, who is now free from the law, to live according to the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh. We have to realize how strong our flesh actually is and not ignore the fact that our flesh struggles to dominate our lives. The flesh and the Holy Spirit that live inside the believer are contrary to each other. Our obligation is to walk in the Spirit, not the flesh.

Conversation

I'm reminded of the Emancipation Proclamation which granted freedom from slavery, only to find that many slaves went back to work for their former masters. I believe this is a conversation we must have in our church. When we surrender our lives to Jesus, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our lives and not return to the bondage of sin (slavery). Through prayer, study, worship and fellowship with other liked-minded believers, we should be changing as God desires.

What does it mean to be free in Christ? How am I to live as a born again believer? Our prayer is that our lives are led by the Spirit of God exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, thereby keeping in step with the Spirit.

Questions

1. When you surrendered your life to Christ, what- specifically- did Christ set you free from in your life?
2. What does it mean for you to be free in Christ?
3. Once you are saved, how should your life and lifestyle adjust, if at all?
4. What does it mean to walk in the Spirit? How do you accomplish this?
5. Discuss the fruit of the Spirit, each one. Explain how you live in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Ministry of Restoration

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min.

Pastor, Allen Chapel AMEC (Riverside, CA)

03 February 2019

Prayer

Eternal God, our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will grant us the courage and gentleness to help a brother or sister who has either stumbled or has a heavy burden and needs our assistance to carry such a burden. Help us to be bold, yet sensitive in our approach. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture

Galatians 6:1-2

Contemporary Context

At our recent Epiphany Institute for the Men's Conference, we opened up our sessions with an exercise. On a piece of paper that all the men had, they were to write a list of two things: what I want others to see when they view me; and how I'm really feeling/areas I'm struggling in my life. They did not write their names on their list. After about 5 minutes working on this list, each man balled up their paper and for the next 2 minutes, we threw the balled up pieces of paper around the room at each other. After this time, each man took the balled up piece of paper, opened it up and read what someone else had written about himself. What we found was that the men in the room all struggled with a various number of issues dealing with their marriages, finances, expectations, relationships with children, and various other struggles. Many of the men were experiencing the same struggles, but no one knew the others' struggle. There were feelings and struggles that everyone present shared, but most were carrying this burden alone.

Exegesis

Freedom in Christ leads us to live by the Spirit. Engaging with humanity with the Holy Spirit leading us, will lead us to the ministry of restoring our brothers and sisters in Christ and helping them carry their burdens, which fulfills the law of Christ.

Those who are led by the Spirit will engage with fellow believers who have slipped in sin and we should restore them in gentleness. The Greek word for restore is *katartizete*, which is used for setting broken bones. If you've ever had this procedure done physically, you know that setting a broken bone is painful. It is helpful if the physician does this procedure as gently as possible. This is the way we should handle each other with the restorative process. It will be painful so we must be gentle. It is with this same gentleness that we bear the burdens of each other.

Conversation

If we were to take the time to form authentic relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we would find that this application would apply for us to minister in restoring and carrying burdens. Often times, we turn a blind eye to sins and carrying burdens because we are afraid of becoming one who "judges" our neighbor. Especially because so many sins are normalized in the culture. This text teaches us that we, who walk in the Spirit must be prepared and ready to aid and help others, understanding the pain

involved for the one being restored. This means that we cannot expect the restoration to be welcomed. However the Spirit demands our participation in helping our brother/sister to remain faithful and grow in all areas of the Christian journey.

Questions

1. Have you ever seen a fellow Christian stumble in their walk with Christ? If so, did the Holy Spirit lead you to point out what you'd seen in their walk? If so, how was it received? If not, why did you not say or do anything?
2. Do you believe what Christians do is their own business and you shouldn't get involved?
3. How would you explain the spirit of gentleness?
4. If you've seen someone stumble and you've attempted to restore them, how did you take care of yourself to prevent temptation?
5. Explain what it means to bear the burden of others?

Commissioned To Seek Justice!

Rev. Sandra E.H. Smith Blair

Associate Minister, St. Paul AMEC (Berkeley, CA)

10 February 2019

Prayer

I believe, O God, that Thou art an eternal, incomprehensible Spirit, infinite in all perfections; who didst make all things out of nothing, and dost govern them all by thy wise providence. Let me always adore Thee with profound humility, as my Sovereign Lord; and help me to love and praise Thee with godlike affections and suitable devotion.

Scripture

Psalm 82:1-8

Contemporary Context

Injustice in our actions and our treatment of others is unfair, cruel, inhumane, disruptive and destructive. It creates the pain, suffering and chaos that exist in our world, governments, cities, neighborhoods, schools, churches, homes, relationships and lives. Some of the realities that deny the God-given human dignity of a large majority of our society are: racism; sexism and sexual abuse; homophobia; domestic violence; disproportionate access to health care; housing discrimination; inequities in education and employment; food insecurity; marginal income and standards of living; corrupt institutions; structures that privilege the wealthy and powerful; inhumane immigration policies and practices; disparities in legal and judicial systems; cuts in safety nets; threats to civil rights gains; police violence; and mass incarceration.

Exegesis

The monotheistic religion of the ancient Israelites was centered on one true and holy God, Yahweh or Jehovah. But they were surrounded by the polytheistic Palestinians who worshipped many gods of their own creation. They believed in the high god, El, who presided over the council of the gods that governed world affairs. Some Israelites were drawn to worship El and identified him with Yahweh. This Psalm depicts a figurative scene in which Jehovah takes the control wielded by El and puts the other gods on trial, charging them of being unjust and favoring the wicked. The gods are found guilty of not protecting the rights of those who are weak, orphaned, powerless and destitute, but allowing them to be oppressed by the wicked. They are condemned to death for not respecting and valuing God's creation of humans and nature. Their death removes them from power and authority, opening the way for Jehovah's supreme reign of justice. This Psalm affirms that the very essence of divinity is holiness and righteousness and that injustice violates the nature of divinity and God's will for all of creation to have access to life-giving and life-sustaining resources.

Conversation

On Founder's Day we celebrate the life and legacy of Bishop Richard Allen (2/14/1760-3/26/1831), founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first denomination established by and for people of African descent in the U.S.A. He and other forefathers and foremothers stepped out in faith to create a home for African Methodists to worship freely, laid the groundwork for us, sacrificed to give us a religious heritage and tradition, and left their witness to guide us. Richard Allen could have found an excuse in the fact that he was young, not formally educated, a former slave with only manual labor skills, and of low station in life. But he had a burden to civil rights, to serve humanity, and to spread the liberating and empowering gospel. Bishop Allen lived in a context of injustice in which his people were still enslaved, marginalized, oppressed, without rights, yearning and striving for freedom, and denied education and other opportunities.

Chattel slavery is no longer the law of the land but we are in bondage to blatant racism and unjust socio-economic and political realities. These conditions challenge us to take action as individuals, a church, and as a community. We can't afford to waste our time, energy or resources. We can't sit on the sidelines and not be engaged. Each of us has to do his or her part no matter how small it may seem to be. Bishop Allen's commission was not an easy one but he faced it with courage, conviction and determination. He leaned on his faith as he faced opposition. He depended on God to provide for and direct him. He trusted the fulfillment of the work given to his hands and in the assurance of God bringing about the vision given to him. On Founder's Day we take time to reflect on our history, to remember our heritage, and to show our pride in the legacy passed on to us. Bishop Richard Allen gave the commission that the people of African Methodism are "...with long suffering and bowels of compassion, to bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ, praying that our mutual striving together for the promulgation of the Gospel may be crowned with abundant success."¹ During the Season of Pentecost we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that empowers us as members of "A Holy Nation" to fulfill our commission to a ministry of justice and righteousness that seeks out and serves the lost, the hopeless, the helpless, the powerless and the needy.

Questions

1. How are we as individuals and congregations preserving our legacy and passing on our history?
2. How does the Pentecost event inspire us to spiritual renewal and revival?
3. What injustice affects you most deeply and how can you redress it?
4. What can you do to improve the life of those less fortunate?
5. In what ways are you sharing and witnessing to your faith?
6. How can we as "A Holy Nation" fulfill our commission to seek justice?

¹ Excerpt of a prayer, "Acts of Faith", written by Bishop Richard Allen in *The Life Experience And Gospel Labors of the Rt. Reverend Richard Allen Written By Himself*.

The Better Connection!

Rev. Sandra E.H. Smith Blair

Associate Minister, St. Paul AMEC (Berkeley, CA)

17 February 2019

Prayer

Precious Lord. Like a deer pant longs for streams of water, so our souls long to be refreshed and restored by Your presence. Thank you for seeing our needs and providing Your Holy Spirit to keep us connected to you, to find renewal in body, mind and spirit, and to empower us to witness to the world so that others can find joy, peace, and fulfillment in You. Amen!

Scripture

Luke 10:28-42

Contemporary Context

In this global digital age, computer and internet technology receives, stores, processes and transmits an endless data stream of ideas, opinions, knowledge and images. A vast array of software programs and applications afford access to media that has radically transformed how we function. Our smartphones, tablets and other digital devices that keep us connected 24/7 are an integral part of our everyday lives that we have become dependent upon to communicate, obtain information and perform tasks. This technology has made inter-connection possible in new ways, but it has serious drawbacks, such as; social isolation, depersonalizing human experience and engagement, information overload, over-reliance and addiction, privacy breaches, automation replacing workers, and complexities that are outpacing human ability to comprehend.

Exegesis

The Bible was written by men and predominantly about men. Women were considered inferior and had secondary status in the biblical narrative. Their stories were not regarded as important to record, and most women found in the text are unnamed. This passage in the Gospel of Luke introduces us to two sisters, Martha and Mary, whose connection to God provides a lesson in contrast. Martha is the epitome of practical service, expressing her devotion through her hospitality. On this occasion she is overwhelmed by tasks and frustrated because Mary is not helping her. Jesus reproaches her for being so preoccupied and distracted by profane details that she is neglecting her spiritual nurture and health. Because of a weakened connection she is not able to experience the joy and fulfillment of spiritual fellowship with God.

By contrast, Mary chooses what Jesus describes as “the better part”, inner spiritual growth and development of discipleship which can never be taken away from her. She sets aside everything to sit at his feet (a gesture of complete humility, respect and submission that is not a typical role for women) to learn from Jesus and receive the knowledge, wisdom and information he imparts. She chooses the area

of service and devotion that is of lasting value and through which she can find joy and peace in a deeper connection to God.

Conversation

Some scholars describe Martha as representing those who seek connection to God through righteousness by works – the *vita activa*, life focused on practical action. Mary is seen as representing those who seek connection to God through righteousness by faith – the *vita contemplativa*, the nurturing of the inner spiritual life. Today we are so engaged with family obligations, work responsibilities, and commitments to church and social or civic organizations, few of us have the luxury of extended periods of devotional or contemplative time. Yet we cannot afford to neglect our spiritual life. We are both physical and spiritual beings and for a healthy, holistic life, we have to nurture both aspects of ourselves. For our ultimate spiritual, mental, physical and emotional well-being, we need to be connected to God through our prayer life, study of God’s word, and quiet time of meditation. These are important ways in which we can communicate, connect and strengthen our relationship with God as well as increase our faith.

The Fifth District’s focus this year is on a Season of Spiritual Renewal and Revival, inspired by the Pentecost Event recorded in Acts 2. Before His Ascension, Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to endow His disciples with the power to be His witnesses throughout the world. The day on which the Holy Spirit descended on them marked the beginning of the Christian Church and its global mission, as well as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on all believers. The Spirit is our connection to God, and its presence imparts new and vital life that enables us to be open to God’s urging and guidance and empowers us to be disciples witnessing what God in Christ Jesus does in our life. Our spiritual practices are what sustain that connection. The digital technology and devices that we depend on so heavily are amazing feats of human creativity and invention. But they are useless if they are not connected to a power source. Another drawback is the short lifespan of devices and machines which quickly become archaic and unusable. Martha was depending more on her own resources and abilities which, being human, are limited. Mary depended on spiritual resources that transcend our imperfect humanity. Spiritual power is endless, unlimited, all-sufficient, dynamic, and everlasting. When we are connected to that power source we never have to worry about it failing us or becoming obsolete. It is the better part!

Questions

1. Who would you compare yourself to – Martha or Mary – and why?
2. In what ways have you experienced the Holy Spirit?
3. How would you describe your spiritual connection with God?
4. What changes do you need to make to enhance your spiritual growth?
5. What is our Christian commission to be disciples and to make disciples?
6. How do you envision the spiritual qualities of “A Holy Nation”?

Divine Justice, Hope and Marriage

Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett

Pastor, Hope Community AMEC (Tucson, AZ)

24 February 2019

Prayer

Lord- prepare our hearts to be open to receive your guidance in every aspect of life. Help us to walk as a holy people in the midst of uncertain times so that you will receive the glory. In Jesus Name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85

Contemporary Context

Marriage is an important step in one's life. It should not be taken lightly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report the marriage rate of 6.9 per 1,000 total population. Some of the questions one might want answered before marriage include religious practices, type of work, family background, medical history, etc. Technology has transformed how many in our society seek and establish romantic relationship. The Pew Research Center (2016) report nearly half of the public know someone who uses online dating or who has met a spouse or partner online. Online dating and attitudes toward online dating have grown progressively more positive. 5% of Americans who are in a marriage or committed relationship say they met their significant other online. Reality television offers another option for finding a marital partner in the 21st century. Both men and women share their desires and life with millions of people in hopes of saying "I do." Many people still prefer to meet their potential spouse face to face and engage in a long dating process before taking the big step toward marriage. Marriage is a matter of the heart and when our heart is sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, one is led to marry the Lord's choice.

Exegesis

Hosea is the first of the twelve Minor Prophets. They are not called "minor" because they are less important than the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) but because their books are much shorter.

Hosea, whose name means "Yahweh saves", was a passionate man. God's holy people have done all that they were commanded not to do. This prophet is called to speak to the holy nation concerning their future. Deep emotions are seen in the passages on Hosea's troubled marriage and in his use of some quite extraordinary imagery to describe his relationship with his God, with his wife and children and with Israel, as well as Israel's relationship with God.

Hosea lived in troubled and chaotic times. The forty-year reign of Jeroboam II as King of Israel was followed by great political and social instability. We could compare it to what many people of color are living under today. The book of Hosea opens with the traditional prophetic formula that indicates that the prophet's message is inspired and does not come from him but from the Lord. He is directed to go marry a prostitute, Gomer. She is a symbol of Israel's great sin. Hosea is a picture of God's love that will not let Israel go. Although Israel has forsaken God, she/he pursues the unfaithful and rebellious people to bring them back to herself/himself.

The children that are born out of this troubled marriage are named to reflect God's retributive and restorative justice upon Israel. The first child, Jezreel is synonymous with blood shed and massacre. The Lord will break Israel's bow and be an enemy to the unfaithful and rebellious. The second child, Lo-Ruhama's name is interpreted as "not loved". And the third child, was named Lo-Ammi, meaning "not my people". The three names portray the increasing severe judgement – retributive justice. The Lord will destroy both the king and the nation and completely disown for a period of time the holy people. The Lord promises a reversal of judgement and restoration – restorative justice. God goes back to the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 22:17, "I will surely bless you and make you descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore." Where sin increased, grace increased even more (Romans 5:20).

Conversation

Imagine you are relaxed reading a good book. Now, you know the voice of the Holy Spirit, and it has disrupted your quiet time with an unusual assignment. In order for you to fulfill the assignment, you must abandon your strong held beliefs, let go of what the family and friends will think and risk your peace of mind. What will it take for us to surrender our will and way, to be led by the Spirit so that our family, church, community and nation might experience Godly restoration?

Questions

1. What questions might Hosea have asked of God before taking Gomer as his wife?
2. How might our nation be experiencing retributive justice?
3. What are signs of hope among an oppressed people?
4. When does restoration of a community of faith or nation begin?

Proper Priority of Possessions

Rev. Dr. Gloria Barrett

Pastor, Hope Community AMEC (Tucson, AZ)

03 March 2019

Prayer

O Lord, we lift our hands in thanksgiving for all you have done, are doing, and will do in our lives. Thank you for the abundance of grace showered upon on us this day. Prepare us to be your disciples who bring hope in uncertain times. In Jesus Name we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Luke 12:13-21

Contemporary Context

God has provided us with many opportunities to be a blessing to others. The number of children who go to sleep hungry is on the rise in marginalized communities. Those in need of clothes and shelter are at an all time high around the nation. The gap between the wealthy and poor continues to widen after the passage of the 2018 tax plan giving the top 1% the largest tax break in the history of our nation. We are bombarded with advertisements designed to encourage us to buy the latest fashion or technological advancement which creates more clutter and shortage of personal storage places. Have we compromised our relationship with God and humanity to be counted among the “in crowd” that possess more than enough material goods?

Exegesis

Some theologians believe that Luke, a Greek and Gentile Christian was the author of this text written around A. D. 60. Jesus is teaching about a major distractions to the spiritual life, greed and the pursuit of possessions. Jesus is approached by a man with a question concerning the family estate. It is the custom for rabbis to mediate disputes within the family. However, this unnamed man really wants Jesus to be an advocate for him against his brother. This is an opportunity for Jesus to teach followers about the proper priority of possessions with this parable of the rich man. When Jesus makes the warning, “ Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed”, he has more than money in mind. Life consists of more than the accumulation of wealth. When possessions are the goal, people become the pawn. The rich man’s words and actions show he believes what he has is for him alone. He speaks in the first person about what he has: my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, myself. Instead of sharing with others, he makes the decision to build a larger barn for his abundant harvest. He contemplates joining the rich and famous while God plans for him to be among the dead and departed. He is not concerned about others nor God. The wealthy farmer is selfish and separated from God. He has become a worshipper of material things rather than of God. What could have been an opportunity for blessings has become an obstacle for his soul.

Conversation

It is easy to become caught up in the world of excess. Just take a few moments and think about how many pairs of shoes, changes of clothes, and collectibles we have in our possession. Now, think about departing with some of those possessions. If it is hard to think about letting go of those things, we might consider that they have become an obstacle in our spiritual growth, our relationship with God, and others.

Questions

1. Have you been involved in an estate dispute? How did you handle the matter?
2. When you see the homeless on the street, are you moved to meet their need?
3. Do you have enough material goods to share with the needy?
4. If your life is weighed in a balance, what side of the scale would be heavier, possessions or social justice?
5. Who stands to inherit your earthly possessions?
6. How might you witness to the loss using this parable of the rich man?

¹ *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1994.

Welcoming the “Lost”

Rev. Dr. Margaret Redmond

Pastor, Prince Chapel AMEC (Tucson, AZ)

10 March 2019

Prayer

O Holy God of Israel, we ask for understanding and a discerning heart. Help us to see where we restrict access to your lovingkindness and goodness. Show us the way to heal our land of all that afflicts us. Help us to see how we can become holy agents of your grace and mercy.

Scripture

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Contemporary Context

There are many current day prophets speaking truth to power. Yet they are ignored for the sake of political expediency and maintaining the status quo. Many people voted to elect leaders whose historical and current behavior contradict their campaign slogans and promises. We are assailed with “alternative news” called the truth while provable facts are labeled “fake news.” The weight of the resulting chaos is overwhelming us to the point that it becomes difficult to maintain our hope that is grounded in God’s steadfast love. Even in the church, we have leaders who deny us free and unfettered access to God, creating rules and rituals to include some and exclude others. But we are called for such a time as this and it is the church’s task to be the holy nation that reminds us that God is not the vengeful God painted by those who cherry-pick scriptures to justify their denial of God’s grace and mercy. Especially in these times, God is calling us to show his glory in our attitudes and actions.

Exegesis

Isaiah 1 is a summary of the message of the prophet Isaiah as expressed in the entire chapter. The theological movement mirrors the judicial process, reflecting the style of a lawsuit against the Israelites by the prophet on behalf of God. The crime is their failure to know or understand (1-3). Second, the nation of Judah has rejected her Lord and the result of that rebellion is disaster for the people, especially focused on the Holy City (4-9). Third, the prophet now turns to instruction, continuing to criticize behavior, but also pointing out how to correct their behavior (10-16), and providing admonitions that hold out the possibility of transformation and the direction for deliverance (17-18). Fourth, (18-20), the decision for judgment or deliverance is stated explicitly: obedience brings salvation, but rebellion brings the sword.

Isaiah was inside the Temple in the time that King Uzziah died-somewhere between 742 and 726 BCE. King Uzziah’s death signaled the end of an era of relative independence for Judah, so during most of Isaiah’s lifetime, Judah lived under the threat of Assyrian domination. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) had already been devastated by Assyria and many had been carried into exile.

Isaiah was God’s spokesperson to Judah and Jerusalem at a time when the nation was immersed in sin. He spoke God’s indictment against their sins and urged them to repent. He then foretold their fate

would be the same as the Northern Kingdom: exile into a foreign land. It is in this context that Isaiah prophesies to the people that judgment will come as a result of their rebellion against God.

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 focuses on the indictment of God's people, specifically for rebelling against the Lord, failure to acknowledge God's lordship, and rejection of The Law. They trusted in the trappings of worship when they should be seeking justice and caring for the poor. Leaders and the powerful have failed to lead justly, and scoffed at the word of the Lord (28:11-15). People, nation and city have been thrown into chaos. King and people will be carried into exile. But the book of Isaiah also proclaims the good news that the Lord will act to save, to redeem, and to transform. A new king will establish peace and justice (9:1-8). One admonition in these chapters, however, is distinctive and foundational: it is the summons to trust in the Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

Conversation

In many churches there are absent generations. People don't bring their babies and young people to church. Millennials are turned off by what they view as archaic cultic practices and inauthentic Christianity. The baby boomer generation is largely unchurched, and the builder generation is aging out-living in nursing homes and assisted care facilities, unable to physically enter our non-ADA-accessible churches and share their wisdom with us. In short, the church has neglected to pay attention to our physical and spiritual accessibility. The crucial element of inaccessibility is that we often preach and teach a vengeful God, devoid of grace and mercy; whose steadfast love, grace and mercy are only accessible through our prescribed orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We project others' sins as abominations before God, yet claim that our sins are covered by God's mercy. While it is important and necessary to define what we believe and how we should worship, the church should be a place where all God's people are welcome.

Questions

1. When has God's name been used to paint God as a vengeful, judgmental God?
2. What are some practices in our churches that hinder others from coming to know a loving and benevolent God?
3. What are some national practices that deny justice to the oppressed and dispossessed?
4. What are some personal practices that frustrate others' relationship with God?
5. How have we personally dispossessed the widow, orphan and child?

We Are the Salt of the Earth

Rev. Dr. Margaret Redmond

Pastor, Prince Chapel AMEC (Tucson, AZ)

17 March 2019

Prayer

O Holy God of Israel, remind us that it was You who brought us up out of bondage. It was You alone who brought us to a pleasant land, flowing with milk and honey. Turn again to us, have regard for this vine, the stock your right hand has planted. We have been burned with fire. Restore us O God, that we may positively affect those places where we have power to spread your love, justice and mercy. You alone Lord are able to restore us. Let your face shine upon us that we may be saved and in turn draw others to you.

Scripture

Isaiah 5:1-7

Contemporary Context

Our lifestyle as Christians is one of the most effective means of sharing the Gospel. As Christians we are called to be the salt of the world, seasoning the life of those in our sphere of influence with God's provision, wisdom, mercy and grace. Sometimes a direct confrontation and punishment is necessary when our close friends and kindred are making bad choices that lead to certain destruction. But too often, we use a sledgehammer when a subtle approach yields more fruitful results. However, this should not be our default position- using our righteous indignation and Christian liberty to berate, demean and exclude others. Too often, we fail to attend to the circumstances that caused the destructive behavior before we attempt to try and resolve the issue. Before we bring out our sledgehammer of condemnation and punishment, we should "sit with them" to understand the situation, establish a relationship with them, show them God's love by word and deed, and remind them of God's steadfast love and concern.

Exegesis

In the opening verses (1-3), Isaiah sings a love song on behalf of his friend (beloved is appropriately translated here as "friend"). His friend has planted a vineyard on a fertile hill. His friend has taken great pains to clear it of stones, build a watchtower and dig a wine vat so that he could make wine from the grapes that grew. However, something went wrong: he expected choice grapes; instead it yielded wild grapes that provided no refreshment or healing.

In verses 3-6, Isaiah allows the friend to speak for himself. His friend brings charges against his vineyard, reporting as if in court, asking the audience to act as judge. He argues that he has done everything necessary to promote growth, but the vineyard had failed him. So he announces the punishment.

Only until verse 7 does Isaiah speak prophetically. The allusion in verse 6 ("I will command the clouds...") exposes the owner of the vineyard as God and the vineyard is Israel. In this light we understand why the hearers were asked to "judge between me and my vineyard"—that is, determine for themselves who is guilty of failure.

What began as a love song has now become a trial in which Isaiah, on behalf of and speaking for God, argues a case before an Israelite audience. (A close parallel to this passage is the prophet Nathan's confrontation of David with the parable of the poor man's lamb in 2 Sam 12:1-15.) The accused hear a parable that leads them to pronounce judgment on an unproductive vineyard, thereby pronouncing judgment on themselves. Israel forgot the Holy One of Israel who had brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the land that God promised them. (Ps 78:10-11). They turned back and acted unfaithfully like their fathers (II Kings 17:78).

The Israelites had established their own laws that did not embody the spirit of God's laws handed down to them in the wilderness. Isaiah's task was to call the people to repentance, so he chose a subtle approach. They needed to decide for themselves what to do about their injustice and unrighteousness. Sometimes the prophets used the sledgehammer, confronting their hearers directly and bluntly. The sledgehammer comes out here, but it is hidden until the very end. Isaiah's approach is subtle and inviting, not only catching the attention of the audience but also drawing them into a process that leads them to a decision. Like David in Nathan's story of the poor man's lamb, the hearers have become convinced of the logic of the argument before recognizing it applies to them.

Conversation

Often have we enjoyed the blessings God has given us without considering the oppressed and disenfranchised in the pews as well as the streets. When new members join the church, we assume that they fully understand the concept that salvation exists in the present and throughout eternity. When we see them in trouble, we offer prayers without substance, often suggesting that their salvation lies in the right doctrine and discipline.

People are more likely to become disciples once we establish relationships with them. Except for the first Twelve Disciples, Jesus met people at their point of need, and they became disciples once they knew him and the salvation he offered. Prayer and provision should go hand in hand as we minister to others. While we cannot meet every need, God's agenda would be well served if we look at our churches' financial and human resources to find ways we can be God's agents of transformation. We would do well to remind them of God's grace, mercy and promises to his people as we offer relief from their troubles: God has plans to prosper and not harm us, and bring us to a bright future. Strong class leaders and extravagant hospitality are valuable tools for membership growth and retention.

Questions

1. Is it God's justice when we expect people to know what we know and/or behave exactly like us?
2. What are some consequence of assuming that people know all that we know about what God expects of us?
3. How can your church improve its relationship-building with new members and your community?
4. Discuss some ways that you can become a more positive influence in places where you have power to effect events and developments.

Unshakable and Unbreakable

*Lic. Everett Fletch, RAYAC Coordinator,
Midwest Annual Conference*

24 March 2019

Prayer

Lord God, it is to You we give the glory and praise. You have allowed us to be in Your presence and we are grateful for Your grace and mercy you grant us daily. God, our Father, our Alpha and Omega, teach us and guide us into an unbreakable spirit, and unbreakable mind, and unbreakable heart. For we know the plans you have for us, and through it all, we are conquerors by Your power.

Amen

Scripture

Hebrews 12:18-29

Contemporary Context

Alicia Keys song “Unbreakable” speaks of a love so strong that it’s unbreakable. “We’ve got to stay tuned, there’s more to see (unbreakable), through the technical difficulties (unbreakable)...No thing, no money, no sin, no temptation, talking ‘bout nothing, Yeah, unbreakable.” Those lyrics define the struggles that one often faces, and can cause one to breakdown. Sometimes it’s our lack of faith. Is it our fear to believe that we cannot receive the same power, that same strength, through the power of God?

Elohim’s new covenant on Mt. Zion to all of those who believe, reminds us that we can all receive the goodness and saving grace of God. We are unbreakable. We are heirs. We are God’s own.

It often reminds me of today’s church. Through the adversities, disparities, and inequalities, we have to understand that the church is unbreakable with God.

Exegesis

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews shares in imagery by telling the disciples that they “have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness...” (Heb. 12:18-21, ESV). The author is describing Mt. Sinai where the people of Israel came to the mountain in Sinai. The people were fearful, and sent Moses to speak with God. God was disappointed with the actions of the people and their sinning so God sent word of fear into the hearts of the people. It was at this time where all who heard from God through Moses were not only amazed, but scared of being in the presence of God. This fear was intended for the people to stop sinning.

However, the author reminds the disciples that they are now not at that place, but that they are now at Mt. Zion. This is the ‘here and now.’ They should be excited about being in the presence of God and God welcomes them because they are a part of something great. They are part of the Ecclesia, the assembly, the church, whose names are registered in heaven. This is for all of those who believe and fall true to His word.

The author warns the Hebrews not to be like Esau who gave up spiritual blessing for physical pleasure. He warns the Hebrews not to be tempted to trade true spiritual worship for worship that is physical... that of the Old Testament...in the days of Mt. Sinai

V.27-28 the author shares that this promise refers to the removal of things that are shaken. Those things that are made by God, not man. Things are not shaken have not been made with human hands. Those things not made by God must be 'shaken', or removed so that the things that cannot be shaken remain.

The author then brings us close to the disciples. In knowing that his promise is true and that we are God's creatures, we cannot be shaken or destroyed. Therefore, let's be grateful for this that we are receiving. Worship in Spirit and truth. Be thankful, keep pressing, because we are unbreakable.

Conversation

Often times in our local churches, we lose direction in the purpose and direction for what God has called us to do. We get weak in our faith. We are attacked from all directions in and out of the church, but Paul provides us direction and hope. In many ways, the hardships we face, the ongoing discipline of the Lord that all who are in His will and must endure, in many ways, all of those things are a part of this – they are all signals and signs that anticipate this coming reality. They are the earthly “shocks” and “tremors”, on the seismograph of God's judgement, telling us that something is coming.

So until it gets here, we must wait. There is no hurrying along the purposes of God. They move with perfect speed and unwavering intention. It is just no good trying to hurry them along. At the same time, there is no good in giving up and walking away. The consequences of that are far greater than anything we might endure here. What do you do when you cannot move forward? You worship. Paul worshiped in his cell many lonely nights.

We must worship and continue to serve in spite of it all. Doing that one thing that makes sense, and in a strange sort of way, makes more sense in the middle of hardship than it does anywhere else. Right where you are, give God what He is due. Such worship provides access to God. It connects us with God, with angels, and with saint past and present who comprise that “great cloud of witnesses”. When you worship, give thanks. Thank the Lord for the grace that was shown to you. Then let that gratitude for His grace motivate you to reach out to others who are in desperate need of grace just like you are. We are unbreakable.

Questions

1. What do you do when the present is often unbearable, and the future is virtually un-seeable? What do you do?
2. What part do you play in being a part of the unshakable, unbreakable kingdom?
3. How are you worshiping God throughout the everyday routine? Look to how you can worship God acceptably.
4. What ways can the local church build up each other within the body of Christ?
5. The church's role has been severely drowned in its importance in society. Those things that are made by human hands seem to supersede the Word of God and its teachings. How can we, as the Ecclesia increase the effectiveness in our teaching, evangelism, and true worship in the church?

Consistent Praise

Rev. De Jeanne Taylor

Associate, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)

31 March 2019

Prayer

Lord God, help us to love as you love, care as you care, and extend grace as you have shown us grace. Amen.

Scripture

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Contemporary Context

Back in the day we had the “Our Gang/ Little Rascals” mentality: all for one and one for all. We took care of each other and we took care of each other’s children when there was a need. Families would plan to share meals (dinner or supper) when we knew it was getting close to the end of the month and the money was getting tight. When a new family moved into the neighborhood, folks would get together and prepare food and take it to them to welcome them to the neighborhood. Today we find that most people don’t know their neighbors and they don’t really care about their fellow human beings. We have become a competitive, unkind society with the, “I got mine, you get yours”, mentality.

Exegesis

The writer lists practical commands for faithfulness in service to others, to strangers, people in prison, and those who are suffering near and far. Instead, make sure that your love runs deep enough to affect your hospitality, empathy, fidelity, and contentment. The text is imploring us to be our brother’s/sister’s keeper, to understand that when you hurt, I hurt; if you are suffering, I should feel some sort of pain as well. To not be selfish and forget that there are less fortunate people in the places where you work, fellowship and other places that you frequent.

The text encourages us to give hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, speak life to those with low self-worth and low self-esteem. To embrace the stranger and not judge them because they are different than you. This passage also warns us about the love of money and things. It suggests that we learn to be content, strive to live with less rather than desiring more: appreciate what you have instead of resenting what others have. The emphasis is to warn us against being fake.

We become content when we realize God knows what we need and provides for our every need. Jesus doesn’t change how he operates, and its important for us to remember to follow the example of Christ by being humble and remembering the investment that was made for us and continuing to make an investment in others through service. Through Jesus, we should continually offer a sacrifice of praise, in the morning, noon and night for all that he has done.

Conversation

Throughout our lives, each of us has experienced a time when we felt less than and needed some reassurance from a friend or a loved one. There have been times when we may have made some choices that cost us everything- our self-worth, our self-esteem, our children, our marriage, our self-respect. Many of us judge or attempt to match our insides based on someone else's outsides. We look across the room and assume the other person has it all together based on what they wear, what they drive, and where they live. Furthermore, those of us who have struggled with depression or other mental health disease felt we weren't good enough, we stayed in the background and refused to use our voice for fear of being judged or shunned. There are times when we don't praise because we fear what others will think, even though they may not understand our journey or why we praise. Hebrew 13 reminds us that unity is what pleases God. It reminds us of the importance of coming together and remembering the value of love, consideration, hospitality to strangers and loved ones. It also reminds us that Praise is the answer to the woes of the world and it pleases God.

Questions

1. Have you ever witnessed people in the church be shunned by a group or an individual? And what did you do about it?
2. Have you ever felt like you had to meet a certain standard to walk into the sanctuary?
3. Have you ever ministered to someone in prison? Why do you feel it important or not?
4. When was the last time you broke bread with someone you didn't know?
5. Do you have more than you need and what keeps you from sharing with others?
6. Do things give you companionship and why are we afraid to let go of the stuff and trust God?
7. How do you Praise at home and at church?
8. Do you know your neighbors and their children? When was the last time you cooked something or took them a gift?
9. When was the last time you invited a stranger to church?
10. How much praise time do you give God daily?

God Sees You

Rev. Patricia Freeman

Associate, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)

07 April 2019

Prayer

Trustworthy G-d, you who knows so intimately all there is to know about us; and yet who loves and cherishes us; we come to worship and praise you for your holy and gracious love that accepts us as we are. You also know what our potential is; and you offer us your empowerment to enable us to grow and become who you created us to be. We come in trust to you today, to thank you for the generosity of your love and care over us. Amen

Scripture

Psalm 139:1-18

Contemporary Context

One of the greatest truths in life which we all know, but which we all must come to learn, is that there is no escape from G-d. Like fugitives, we may run, but we cannot ultimately hide from the G-d who penetrates even the darkness with the gaze of His light. If we manage to dodge Him in this life, we must still stand exposed before Him on that fearful day of judgment. There is no place to hide from G-d.

Exegesis

Verse 1-6

These verses speak of the omniscience of G-d. David marveled at the intimate way in which G-d was acquainted with him. Notice that G-d knows when we are at rest and work. God knows our motives. God knows our thoughts before we clothe them with words. God knows everything about our public and private life. There is absolutely nothing about us that G-d does not know. Such knowledge boggled David's mind.

Practical Consideration: The fact of G-d's omniscience (Infinitely wise) should keep evil in check. Knowing that G-d is omniscient should motivate us to live holy lives. Knowing that G-d sees our actions should motivate us to act in a manner in line with G-d's Word. Knowing that G-d knows our words before they are spoken should cause us to exercise caution and discretion before we speak. Knowing that G-d knows everything about us should have an impact on our attitude toward sin.

Verse 7-12

These verses speak of the omnipresence (present everywhere at the same time) of G-d. It is impossible to escape the presence of G-d. Adam and Eve tried to hide from G-d, but found they could not do so. Jonah tried to run from G-d, but found he could not do so. It is impossible to escape G-d's presence by going up or down, east or west, or by trying to hide in the cover of the deepest darkness. We cannot escape His presence by death, distance, or darkness. We cannot escape G-d by death. He is on both sides of the grave. No man can run fast enough to leave G-d behind. Darkness may hide men from men, but it cannot hide men from G-d. No matter where man may go, G-d is already there!

Practical Consideration: It is impossible to escape the presence of God.

There is absolutely no place where men can go to escape the presence of G-d. He inhabits yesterday, today, and tomorrow. While sinners try to escape G-d's presence, believers take comfort in His presence. G-d's omnipresence should also motivate us to live holy lives. Everything that men do, good and evil alike, is done in the presence of G-d.

Verse 13-17

G-d's omniscience and omnipresence extends even to the womb. G-d sees and knows everything that occurs in the conception and development of human life as it is carefully and skillfully embroidered in the darkness of the womb. David acknowledged the fact that only G-d has the power to create a human life: "Thou didst weave. . ." Verse 16 is understood in two ways. Older Hebrew scholars interpreted it to mean that G-d, like an architect, was acquainted with the blueprint for our physical makeup before we were formed. Others interpret it to mean that G-d knows the length of our life before it begins.

Practical Consideration: God is pro-life!

According to Psalm 139, G-d is pro-life. Every life is important to G-d, including the unborn. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the conception of a child, G-d sees and knows everything that occurs within the womb as that life begins to develop. And that life is important, valuable, and significant to G-d.

Verse 17-18

These are very comforting verses to the believer. They remind us that G-d is always thinking of us. In fact, G-d thinks about us so much that it would be impossible to count all of His thoughts. His thoughts toward us would easily outnumber the sand. We can go to bed at night with the assurance that G-d is thinking about us. We can wake up in the morning with the same assurance. G-d never stops thinking about us or being concerned about us.

We too, should think about G-d. We should fill our minds with godly thoughts. We should think about G-d when we go to bed at night and when we get up in the morning.

Practical Consideration: We should fill our minds with thoughts of G-d.

Men who fill their minds with thoughts about G-d do not have room for lesser or petty thoughts. Paul wrote, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2).

Conversation

We should set aside time to be alone with G-d in quiet meditation or in the study of G-d's Word. G-d is with us, let us take time to be with G-d who accepts us as we are. We don't need to hide. Let us give G-d the recognition, glory, and gratefulness G-d deserves through our thoughts and actions.

Questions

1. Why are we afraid to be known thoroughly?
2. How vulnerable should we be?
3. What principles guide how much we share with others?
4. How can a person develop a sense of G-d's unshakable presence? How do you 'practice the presence of God'?
5. Does God love everyone equally? Must we? What does this mean practically?

Media

"God Sees You" by Lara Martin

Be Obedient to the Gift of God

Rev. John H. Freeman, Jr.

Associate, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)

14 April 2019

Prayer

Father G-d let your love and peace rain down on us, let us understand that it is not about us, but about you Lord.

Scripture

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Contemporary Context

Division in the church is nothing new. We come into the body of Christ as individuals with different backgrounds and cultures. Each one of us has our 'own understanding' of right and wrong and how things should be. Once we give our lives to Christ and decide to join a community, we must be open to learning a new way of being and interacting. Life in the body of Christ is different than life in the world. We are called upon to recognize and develop gifts that God has placed inside of us instead placing value on what we can see. Unless the church is intentional about this re-training, we are destined to be divided.

Exegesis

Paul planted a Church in Corinth and after he left, the church became divided. The word reached Paul in Ephesus and he wrote this letter to remind them about what is most important in the church, Jesus Christ. The division in Corinth was severe. Two, possibly even four parties/groups seemed to have developed: the Paul, Apollos (Apollos was a "native of Alexandria... a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures", Act.18:24-28), Peter and "Christ" parties/groups. Paul had obviously come in for some heavy criticism, so he sought to calm the dispute in the church while defending his apostolic role and his gospel. Clearly, the Corinthians had overvalued human wisdom and ended up devaluing the gospel. Paul makes a clear distinction in vs. 17 between what he calls "words of human wisdom" and the gospel of the "cross of Christ." Paul argues that the gospel is not something that needs improving by the addition of human wisdom. In fact, the message concerning the cross of Christ does not make common sense. As far as human reasoning is concerned, the gospel is foolishness. So, beware of testing it by human wisdom. The wisdom of this world is foolishness, vss. 18-21. The foolishness of the cross is true wisdom, vss. 22-25.

Conversation

Proverbs 3:5 tells us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not to our own understanding. In Corinth everyone seemed to be leaning on their own understanding and bringing world values into the church. There is division between the wise and educated, and those who were not educated. Some people acted like they were more important and more valuable than others. The church lost its focus on Jesus and began to focus on the people's status, because of the gifts that G-d had given them. So God said "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." It's not about us.

We must keep our eyes on the one from whom our help comes!

Questions

1. Do your titles and degrees make you better than everyone else? Are some people treated differently inside the church because of their external successes (nice car, big house, high-paying job)?
2. Can we be led by an uneducated person if they are called by G-d? What about a woman? A child?
3. What values are different in the church than in the world?
4. What kind of training program would help you and others to adopt the mind of Christ in the church community instead of bringing in an individual perspective?
5. Where do you fit in?

A Clean Heart, Another Chance!

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21 April 2019

Prayer

Give me a clean heart, so I might worship you. Lord fix my heart, so that I may be used by you.

Scripture

Psalm 51:1-10

Contemporary Context

As a theologian, I believe that an understanding of God is found in everything, at all times and everywhere, even in the creative brilliance of Shonda Rhimes! I watched an episode from season 14 of Grey's Anatomy on Hulu, entitled, Old Scars—Future Hearts. The fictional character, Dr. Meredith Grey stated,

On average, a healthy heart beats 115,000 times per day. When excited, the heart rate can double. The heart pumps 2,000 gallons of blood through your entire body 24 hours a day. It never rests. The heart is the hardest-working muscle in your body. But when it's damaged, it's just like skin. It scars, and scar tissue can be very dangerous in a heart. It weakens it. And eventually, a heart full of scars stops working. Scarred hearts don't heal, but over time, the scars can change. They can become smoother, softer. And some scars can even fade away.

In various conversations with the Medical Director of Cardiovascular Surgery at Wellstar Kennestone Hospital, Dr. William A Cooper, who is also my first cousin, I remember him saying that the heart is an amazing organ. It will eventually repair itself. The heart gets stronger even with a little exercise each day. The heart is resilient and you will be given a second chance to get it right even after a heart attack.

Rest is important after a heart attack, but it's just as important for you to participate in recreation and social events and to begin making physical activity a part of your daily life. In many cases doctors will recommend that survivors get more physical activity than they got before their heart attack. Isn't that ironic? That you if never exercised before a heart attack, you sure better exercise after one!

Exegesis

In today's Psalm, the writer tells of his desire for a second chance, a clean heart, a renewed spirit. Tradition ascribes this psalm to King David and says he composed it after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery and then using his power to have a man killed to cover the king's

own wrongdoing. The writer of the psalm feels the weight of his sins keenly. He feels his sin as a disconnection from God. The image he uses to express his longing for reconnection, for restoration of right relationship with God, is his heart's need for cleansing. Sin has soiled his heart, and so he cries out, "Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Conversation

David had everything: He was a man after God's own heart, but even still his human nature of sin-- that break in relationship with God that happens when we live in the flesh of self-gratification and are not spiritually connected with God— he became adulterous. But watch this: David's remorse made him a broken man. David's glorious reign was clouded with unceasing troubles as a consequence of his shady behavior. Yet, like any heart attack or heart transplant or any other cardio procedure, David continued to exercise! He was an avid "dancer" but more importantly, an exerciser of his faith in God!

Questions

1. Are there similarities in your life to David's, who finally took responsibility for his sinful mistake after Nathan pointed out the error of his ways?
2. What old scars do you harbor that hinder your healing?
3. What would you do with a clean heart, a new heart, a second chance?

The Tired, Poor, Huddled Masses. . .Yearning to Breathe Free

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28 April 2019

Prayer

God, we need help from you to disrupt the social inequalities that we have created. Forgive us for exploiting, rather than empowering those who need us to be merciful and kind.

Scripture

Amos 8:4-7

Contemporary Context

Social researchers have contributed a considerable number of theories about stratification based on ascribed qualities of race, class and gender. However, researchers have given relatively little attention to stratification based on religion and its allocation of power, privilege and prestige from antiquity to modernity. A root cause of the power, privilege and prestige present in ecclesiastical traditions can be correlated to capitalism. Since capitalism is a systemic capillary in the vitality and viability of religious institutions, systems thinking around ecclesiastical traditions are necessary so as to empower rather than exploit. Stratification based on religious practices has a framework imbedded in capitalism. This embedded framework is located in a theology of giving which sets up exploitation in the ecclesia by capitalistic religious leaders who have co-opted being co-creators of justice, peace, reconciliation, equity, inclusion and access, to equating that with wealth creation at the expense of the poor and powerless while using God as the ultimate capitalist. Capitalism has always been a reality whether articulated or not. At a macro level, there is limited research pertaining to the relationship between religion and capitalism in general, yet the Amos pericope suggests what God does to those who exploit the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. Perhaps we in the United States of America should take heed...

Exegesis

The Book of Amos is filled with a call for justice and righteousness and it speaks for equity for the poor and the oppressed in every society. God judges on the basis of sin, not on a socio-economic sliding scale, or on the basis of privilege, or status. Yet, a greater burden on the “haves” to not exploit the “have nots” is critical for community.

Conversation

A consistent feature since the creation and evolution of humans has been some concept of stratification. This concept of stratification is often understood as one life form having power and dominion over another lesser life form as found in the Holy writings of three major monotheistic traditions--the first book entitled Genesis located in the Torah (Judaism), Canonic Scriptures (Catholicism and Protestantism) and referenced in the Qu'ran (Islam).

In our contemporary societies, we witness the uneven distribution of wealth, access, laws and policies that keep the "powerful" in power positions at the expense of those who have little or no control in a capitalistic society.

Questions

1. Are we on the negative side of Amos' critique?
2. Do we exploit the poor in the church with our capitalist cultural identity?
3. How does one hold accountable a perverse capitalist who takes advantage of those who are seeking a closer relationship with God and whose theology is foundational to that of giving to get? (i.e., "If you give, God will bless you", kinds of language used for supporting the church.)

Put Up for Safekeeping

Rev. Terry McCray Hill

Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Portland, OR)

05 May 2019

Prayer

Holy God: Amid the noise of a chaotic world, allow us to hear you. Endow us with your spirit to recognize your “message of hope” for all people. Place in the hearts of those who are exiled, captive, displaced, disconnected and disinherited, a spirit of rejuvenation. “Take our hearts and seal them for your courts above...” Amen.

Scripture

Jeremiah 32:1-15

Contemporary Context

Like Jeremiah in his day, prophetic voices on the public square today are often locked up/silenced for speaking truth to power structures designed to eliminate, intimidate and discriminate- leaving many to question whether it is safe to proclaim truth in the face of adversity. When we recognize God’s message as the authentic voice of hope and liberation, then safety is assured. There are people in pews yearning for a word of hope. There are places and spaces in our communities lying in desolation- clueless- when at the tip of our tongues is God’s word of assurance, and at the extension of our collective hands is God’s action plan to make “life normal again.” (Jeremiah 32:15b). Speak it! Trust it! Act on it! Transform isolation and desolation into springs of hope breaking forth with renewed possibilities for the future—it’s safe.

Exegesis

Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry was filled with risk because of his pronouncement of destruction that would come as the result of the people’s [Israel] unfaithfulness. Guided by God, Jeremiah spoke a message that was difficult to hear but even more difficult to speak—judgment. Because of the breach in covenant relationship, God withdrew blessings from the people, bringing famine, ruin and captivity instead. In this text Jeremiah is imprisoned by King Zedekiah for speaking the truth concerning the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon. Who wants to hear the truth? Yet Jeremiah dared to preach uncompromisingly the message that he had received from God, even if it meant jail time.

It’s ironic that at times of extreme inconvenience and in places of detention and confinement, God still speaks to us... Jeremiah heard, but more importantly responded. God instructed Jeremiah to do something highly unusual for an inmate. He took all the money he had on his books and with witnesses present, purchased and secured title to a parcel of family (Tribe of Benjamin) owned property. With the deed firmly in place, Jeremiah ordered the community to put the documents in “a place for safekeeping”—a jar made of clay. Why would an inmate ask an exiled people to witness the acquisition of a desolate place (their property)? **Jeremiah’s action was symbolic of the hope in God’s promise to one day restore the people.** Jeremiah invested in a future that was yet to come—“life is going to return to normal.”

Conversation, Dialogue & Reflections

1. When was the last time you were confronted with speaking truth to power? The mere fact that you are able to recall the circumstances under which you recognized systemic injustice in any form and can honestly discuss how you were prompted to speak truth is a salvific moment.
2. Describe what confinement feels like to you. Did you know that prison is a physical location, but the feeling of loneliness, abandonment and isolation can be just as debilitating? God wants us to live free! God speaks liberation for all time. Pentecost is our season for spiritual renewal and revival. Set yourself free! “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” (Romans 12:2b)
3. List all the vessels that we use to store items of significant value. What would you put in a personal time capsule? Do you own a footlocker or trunk? What’s in your safe deposit box? Where would you prominently display an urn containing your love one’s ashes? Is your extra cash in the cookie jar on top of the refrigerator? Where is your hope stored? Read 2 Corinthians 4:6-11.
4. God’s safety is everlasting through Jesus Christ: from the protection of the womb of Mary; to the cradling of a lowly manger; in the hull of a storm tossed ship; and ultimately resurrection from a borrowed tomb.

When Tears Aren't Necessary

Rev. Terry McCray Hill

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12 May 2019

Prayer

Loving God: Our cries to you are like a never ending song. Renew our faith. Restore our joy. Rebuild our strongholds. Come swiftly with your promise to “wipe away all tears from our eyes...” Amen.

Scripture

Lamentations 1:1-6

Contemporary Context

In the company of a local resident serving as an unofficial tour guide of sorts, I have been driven through neighborhoods in urban cities that were at one time considered “the hood”. It’s intriguing to note how the focus of the conversation always spirals downward from a tacit description of notable landmarks to a passionate lament over the loss of old stomping grounds as if they had once been declared sacred. Listen to this familiar tune:

“I remember when Jimmy’s Barber Shop use to be right there on that corner. In my youth, I shined shoes out in front. Mama Lucy’s Tea Room was where you could get the \$2 Special, three (3) wings and a slice of white bread, but it’s gone now. It’s a place called Coffee Break. They sell a simple cup of coffee in there for \$5. They knocked my old high school down and built the new one on the other side of town and it takes the kids two (2) busses to get to there. In its place is a state of the art fitness center for members only with an Olympic size swimming pool and off street parking. Charlie’s Groceries was down the street from the church. He’d let us run a tab, cash checks and make change. Eminent domain forced him to sell out. With all the high rise apartment buildings going up, when the members drive in on Sundays for church there’s no street parking, so they just stay home. We don’t know these people moving in here and they are not trying to know us.”

Far too often the hymn of preference is becoming a lament from the people expressing their disdain for gentrification—the process of renovating what is perceived as a deteriorated urban neighborhoods by the influx of the affluent, pricing out longtime residents. **For many the anguish of displacement is a form of exile and tantamount to destruction, disruption and desecration, as opposed to upgrade, improvement and renewal.** Cultural institutions are being threatened, memories eroded and shrines of remembrances trashed, leaving many crying out, “*Who are we and where are we?*”

When I listen to their earnest pleas, I hear the refrains of Chapter 1 of the Book of Lamentations (The Message Bible): How empty the city, once teeming with people... After years of pain and hard labor, Judah has gone into exile. She camps out among the nations, never feels at home. Hunted by all, she's stuck between a rock and a hard place... Her children, prisoners of the enemy, trudge into exile. **Tears aren't necessary to feel the pain.**

Exegesis

Customarily, Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah; but, most scholars do not confidently establish authorship as such. In the Christian canon, Lamentations is cataloged among the prophetic books; however, in the Jewish scriptures, it is found in the Writings or kethubim with the other megillot or festival scrolls. These five scrolls are associated with specific occasions in the Jewish calendar and the community reads sepher 'êkâ (the Hebrew title for Lamentations, literally, "the book of how") during the Ninth of Ab commemorating five (5) catastrophes in Jewish history, including the destruction of the First and Second Temples by the Babylonians and Romans respectively.

In the Jewish community, Lamentations is commonly used in the context of ritual as a conduit for humans to express their sorrow through which a mourning community finds its voice in the midst of suffering. The work depicts a tone which can only be contributed to an overwhelming sense of a nation's sorrow and shame and the grief brought on by its present destitute condition. In essence, it has become only a shadow of its former self—a ghost town. It is for this reason “she cries herself to sleep each night, tears soaking her pillow...” (Lamentations 1:2a)

The text adequately expresses the collective shock that I have witnessed on faces and heard in the voices of a people that have lost the historic character of their cities and have become bewildered over the changing social character of their neighborhoods. One woman upon returning to Portland in 2016 after a twenty (20) year absence said, “Being home again feels strange. It’s like looking in the mirror and not recognizing your own reflection. It’s a crying shame, but the tears won’t fall.”

Conversation, Questions and Reflections

1. Pentecost empowers us for service in the church and the world, catapulting us towards the inclusion of all of God's people in ministry. Discuss strategies that a congregation can employ to sustain its existence amid a neighborhood that is undergoing radical change due to gentrification.
2. Proverbs 22:28 (NRSV): “Do not remove the ancient landmark that your ancestors set up.” How has your community acknowledged and maintained its historical significance?
3. In many respects, Lamentations can be compared to an art form—the blues. Blues is a genre that developed its roots from African musical traditions, African American work songs and spirituals incorporating hollers, shouts, chants and rhymed simple narrative ballads. Read Lamentations 1:1-6 aloud as if the writing were the lyrics to a blues song.
4. For further study: Read and discuss the Book of Haggai and focus on such themes as upgrade, improvement and renewal.. (Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? And do you see it now?)

Unexpected Praise From Unexpected People

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19 May 2019

Prayer

God of grace and God of glory- on thy people pour thy power. Grant us wisdom and grant us power to make the spirit of Pentecost be evident in real time for this generation.

Scripture

Luke 17:11-19

Contemporary Context

Sometimes we can obtain spiritual nuggets from persons we deem to be outcast, or one who has been overlooked, or even those we consider to be unbelievers. At first glance, I believe that some believers have developed a sense of entitlement, believing that blessings exclusively “belong” to us as believers; and, as a result, we take God’s blessings upon us for granted. For those who sense that God does not owe them anything more than what they already have, when God blesses them they feel an overwhelming desire to stop and give God a special praise for what God has done for them.

Exegesis

The story of the ten lepers is a very familiar story for students of the Bible. Here, we learn that ten men, because of their disease, were excluded from their respective communities because they were considered contagious and would subject others to their physical ailment and infirmity. With no one else to call, they turned to call on the name of Jesus as he passed by who directed them to “go show yourselves to the priests.” This is a phrase that must be repeated in our contemporary church in a post-modern world as Jesus is still passing by and walking with us through the dark places and in the rough ravines of life. Taking into consideration the economic disparities between African Americans and whites, and the inequities in criminal sentencing and the incarceration rates among the rich and the poor, the church still must proclaim, “Jesus is still passing by,” and is still directing us to go present ourselves to the Priests, which is what I call a metaphor for us being told to come back to God’s House and give Him the honor that He deserves.

Interestingly enough, nine of the Lepers were supposedly Jews who went to the Priests in times past as part of their tradition and religious ceremony and did not consider turning around to go back to Jesus to say “thank you.” The scripture, however is clear that the one who was always on the outside, the Samaritan, the one you would least expect, was the one who did turn around and give thanks to Jesus for the healing he had received. For him, going to the Priests was more than a religious ceremony and giving thanks to Jesus was his highest priority as Jesus not only changed his condition but changed his life! As believers, let us be one of those to give praise to God for the things God does in our lives; but more

importantly, let us be welcoming to others in our faith community whom society has labeled the outcast, because they too have a praise.

Conversation

I sometimes wonder if our church really gives God an authentic praise through our liturgy and worship experience. Or do we just go through religious ceremony? Could it be that real authentic praise comes from those who come from places on the outside and from the margins of our society?

The Leper that returned to Jesus represented one-tenth, which equals the tithe. This tithe, however, came from a religious outsider and not one from the faith community. Could this biblical implication mean that those who represent the one-tenth- or the covenant community- may be those whom we, as the church have written off? Or maybe the biblical narrative is challenging the reader from the faith community to make room for those different from us, as real change can come from many different places. The important key for us to think about is that when God blesses us in our walk (whatever it is), we must not take it for granted but stop and give our gratitude and praise to God. Their testimony can inspire those who have been in church for many years but have suffered in silence. Let our church be a place that welcomes unexpected praise from unexpected people!

Questions

1. How would you define the church as being a welcoming community?
2. What does it mean to you to welcome others that are different from you?
3. What steps are needed in your faith community to welcome strangers? Keep in mind the Charleston Nine massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church.
4. What are the issues you feel the church must address in being a welcoming community of faith?
5. What are you doing to remember how God is blessing you?

We're Not Done Yet

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26 May 2019

Prayer

God of love and Lord of Mercy, breathe on us and call to our remembrance how Great you are and how evident you become when we find ourselves pressed and in trouble. Remind us that we have no need to fear when you live inside of us, your creation.

Scripture

2 Corinthians 4:8-12

Contemporary Context

There are times when our best is not good enough and our strength is not strong enough. No matter how hard we may try, each of us, at one time or another, may feel that we are hanging on by threads alone. For the believer, there should be a threshold that keeps us from our tipping point where everything is about to boil over. We do not contend that we do not have trials, nor do we maintain that we do not have problems. But the truth is that there is something on the inside working through us on the outside, encouraging us to fight on.

Exegesis

The Apostle Paul claimed in Romans 1:16, that he was not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone believing, both to Jewish first, and to Greek (NASB). Even though Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, his labors were filled with peril and pitfalls.

Paul had hardships of ill health, bereavement, apostasy, and unemployment. He had troubles such as comrades deserting him, being beaten, being thrown in prison, and surviving a ship wreck. In all of these things he was not shaken and was able in 2 Corinthians 4:8-12 to share his testimony, that through all of his hardships, he was still not done yet because as believers share in the sufferings of Christ, we also share in his resurrection.

Conversation

What would our churches look like if we spoke of our hardships but continued our story to share with others that in spite of the problems we have had, we are still here? We are still standing. We still have a testimony. We still have a praise. We still have a witness and we still have the attitude that we're not done yet! There are those who focus on highlighting their heartache and pain. Perhaps this is how they feel they can gain attention, comfort and compassion from others. While we are to console one another, our challenge is also to encourage our people to push the envelope a little further to see how God has kept them and sustained them through it all. Paul is correct as he states in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed" (NLT).

My friend, no matter what it is that you may be going through I want to encourage you because “We’re not done yet!”

Questions

1. Name a time when you felt that all hope was gone but God made a way for you.
2. Do you believe that hardships can sometimes be a blessing to believers? Why or why not?
3. Do you think believers should talk about their hardships or only talk about their successes?
4. How do you incorporate suffering as an integral part of being a believer? Are suffering and believing mutually exclusive or do you believe they are events that are related to each other in some way?
5. What would you say to encourage someone who is only focused on their problems and hardships today?

The Mystery of Manifest Glory

Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes

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02 June 2019

Prayer

Lord, give us a sense of your glory in all that we think, say and do. Amen

Scripture

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Contemporary Context

We, as people of color, considered a minority population in America, can relate to the experiences Paul describes in verses 8-12. Our condition can well be described as an affliction, persecution, and being struck down. Like sheep on their way to be slaughtered, not knowing from day to day what might happen to us, we still persist. Faith for us is the explanation of how we make it. The message of the gospel pushes us towards an unknown future with hope and determination. The ability to do this is the mystery of manifest glory!

Exegesis

The mystery was from the beginning, in the primordial chaos of profound possibilities. From nothing, God creates a world designed to reflect God's glory. It was hidden and not understood fully until the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul uses the terminology of "light shining out of darkness" to describe the work of the Holy Spirit within the believers' heart to help us understand more fully what God's intentions might be. It was God's plan to share this glory with those who would welcome it, as an enablement for intimate relationship between the creature and the Creator. But because our understanding has been compromised by untruth and suggestion, we have not always appreciated the wonder of it all.

In the text at hand, Paul describes this perplexing presence in an ability to withstand tremendous onslaught by adversaries and the human tendency toward self pity. He declares the parallel between himself and Jesus as carrying death and life in the human body.

The glory which God gives could be seen in the face of Jesus, and was seen in the face of Moses, and can be seen in our faces as the manifest presence of Almighty God in these human vessels. As we struggle to manage our humanity, God continues to take us from glory to glory. The evidence is in our overcoming with uncompromising faith in One who cannot fail. Our successful conveyance of the gospel is proof positive that this glory is ours. The treasure is the message of God's boundless love as well as the compulsion to share it.

Conversation

How often do we recall our struggles in the world, in our families and even in our church? Even when others don't understand what drives us to do and be servants of God, we continue to live our lives as loving and just people. People notice this about us and wonder how we can be this way. But we know it's God's glory within us that shines through, despite whatever life brings our way.

Questions

1. Share a time when you experienced God's glory in your life.
2. How can we encourage others through difficult times to rely on God's glory?
3. Do you embrace the power and mind of God over human strength and imagination?

Oil and Water

Rev. Dr. Brenda J. Hayes

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09 June 2019

Prayer

Lord, bless us to know you and serve you in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Scripture

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20

Contemporary Context

There are several tangible symbols for the Holy Spirit. One is oil. Another is water. Aside from their spiritual significance, oil and water were precious commodities for everyday life in the Israelite community. I'm reminded of the saying: "oil and water don't mix". But in the church we need both and they go together quite well. For us, oil represents the impartation of the Holy Spirit for special service. And the water of baptism signifies transformation that can only happen when the Spirit works that change in us. So oil and water *do* mix. In essence, they are the same and they signify the Spirit's work in the heart of every follower of Christ. As natural agents, oil and water keep us supple and pliable and that is how we should be with the Spirit, open and receptive to the leading and sending of God.

Exegesis

God tells Samuel to fill his horn with oil and go. "I'm sending you to identify and anoint the next king". It was one of the priestly functions to consecrate the leaders of Israel, and God was rejecting Saul who was king at the time. So Samuel goes to hold a service of sacrifice as a cover for a coronation. The elders of Bethlehem join Jesse and his sons, all except for David. He has been left tending his father's sheep. Samuel sends for David and is instructed by God to anoint him. After that, the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully on David. This was evident in that he had been extended favor and influence and success throughout his life. He had a heart for God and God blessed him mightily.

Conversation

Across religious circles we hear talk about certain people having an anointing. This means a person has a gift that is powered by the Holy Spirit. The effect of that anointing is to ignite and inspire others. To be gifted and anointed is an awesome responsibility because it means one is evidence of God's indwelling power to change not only the individual but everyone around them. The oil of God not only keeps us supple and pliable but humble and obedient.

Questions

1. David knew he would be king one day. Have you ever been made aware of what the future would be for you?
2. Are the symbols of oil and water discussed in your church? If so, in what way are they used in your religious services?
3. What has been your experience of the Spirit's work in your life?

The Eye of the Storm

Rev. John D. Hill, D.Min.

Pastor, Walker Chapel AMEC (Oceanside, CA)

16 June 2019

Prayer

Help us O God, though storms in our lives may be raging and tossing us to and fro, to keep our confidence in you; that we may experience perfect peace which allows us to keep on trusting in you and growing in our faith. Lord, remind us that no matter what we face in life there is the assurance you are with us in the midst of every storm.

Scripture

Mark 4:35-41

Contemporary Context

Every now and then ships in the Gulf of Mexico and the North Atlantic may find themselves in a storm we know as a hurricane. These storms are placed into various categories based on the intensity of the winds in the system. Sustained wind speeds at a minimum of 75 miles per hour rotating around a center known as an “eye” define a Hurricane. While the most ferocious winds and thunderstorms occur closest to the center of the storm. The eye of the storm is also reported to be the calmest part with clear skies and light winds.

We all face storms of various degrees in life some more severe than others. Storms are nothing new. But every now and then like ships at sea, we find ourselves facing something that unexpectedly hits us and shakes the very foundation upon which we stand- known as our faith. These are moments that can overwhelm us, push and pull us in many directions because of our humanness. When these storms of life rage in our “right now moments” and when devastation is encircling us, it is important to remember that we can find peace in the eye of the storm.

Exegesis

I agree with scholars who argue that we view this familiar biblical narrative in more than a literal sense. For instance, if we look at this story only as a physical miracle wherein which the storm was stilled, then we may limit its scope and its impact on us today. However, if we read the text as an allegory, the result is a deeper meaning and richness to all who would follow Christ. Storms in the context of the Bible often represent crises in our lives. For those who are Disciples of Christ, it should be enough to be with Christ, whether life’s seas are smooth or in the rough waves of trouble. We should not judge Christ’s care for us or the state of our discipleship by the roughness of the sea on which we sail. In the presence of Jesus, we can have peace even in the wildest storms of life. Just as storms continually recur in our lives, so should our faith strengthen.

Conversation

Our faith in Jesus Christ is not automatic; none of us enter this world as a Christian. Growth in our faith differs from our physical growth. Faith and the strengthening of it requires diligent effort. Growth, as a disciple of Christ is a process, stemming from the desire to be more like Jesus in every aspect of life. This desire to take on more of the characteristics of Jesus often pushes us beyond anything we imagined in life. Out of a sense of commitment that comes from deep within us, we have said with a glad heart, “Lord, I will follow you anywhere.” But these words are often easier said than done, for we must put our faith into practice. Each ordeal is an opportunity to put our faith into practice. In these moments, faith in Jesus Christ becomes real. In these moments we learn to turn things over to our Lord. We recognize we can go to Him with our doubts, fears, or any matters of concern, having the assurance that Christ has been with us, Christ is with us and Christ shall be with us forevermore. Christ is, “the eye of the storm,” in the midst of life’s hurricanes.

Questions

1. How many “storms of life” have you faced in the last three months?
2. Which of those storms challenged your faith the most?
3. What was it about that particular storm that raised your anxiety or caused you to be afraid?
4. What was your initial reaction to being afraid?
5. What has Christ delivered you from previously?
6. What words did you speak into the situation?
7. What gave the assurance that Christ was with you in your previous situation?
8. How has your faith grown from a previous storm to the most recent one?
9. How do you stay centered on Christ in the “eye of the storm?”

Hanging On By a Spider's Thread

Rev. John D. Hill, D.Min.

Pastor, Walker Chapel AMEC (Oceanside, CA)

23 June 2019

Prayer

Lord O God, in the darkness of the present moment we- your people- may face individually or collectively, help us to recognize these as moments when you reveal yourself in magnificent ways. Help us to celebrate you Lord even in our right now moments of despair, sorrow, and self-pity. Help us to rediscover your glory in the midst of our trials and tribulations. Amen!

Scripture

Lamentations 3:22-33; Psalms 30

Contemporary Context

One habit I developed early in my ministry as a pastor was visiting members on the sick and shut-in list. I found these visits often turned into fellowship, sharing, and an opportunity to build relationships with those who could not attend worship for medical reasons. One member I remember in particular was an elderly lady who lived with her daughter and family. During our conversations, the subject often turned to how she was feeling. This mother of the church would talk about the aches and pains of arthritis affecting her present life. She shared concerns that were brought up during recent visits to the doctor. Often reminiscing about her past, this church mother's mind was sharp and she always had words of wisdom that only experiences could bring. She would often say, "Through it all, I'm still hanging on by a spider's thread."

A spider's thread is something we may not give much attention, perhaps because of its association with spiders. This thread, as thin as it may be when we think about it, has a place in God's magnificent world. This thread, which spiders use for a variety of purposes, is a type of silk. Without being too technical, a spider's thread, when measured, is stronger than steel on a per weight basis. The true wonder of God's work as well as a testimony to it is in the strength of this thin thread.

Exegesis

Our text reflects a series of never-ending laments, a crying out to God. For two chapters there have been cries and complaints of affliction. The writer seems to be at the lowest point of their life filled with hopelessness as well as bitterness. There is the sense of being separated from God.

Interesting to note is that we do not hear the voice of God in Lamentations. The significance is that God allows others to speak. God does not interrupt to comfort, correct, explain or excuse.

The power in the absence of God's voice is that it honors truth telling. This allows a pouring out of words with all of their pain, anger, grief and questioning. The outpouring allows us to be totally human.

The tone of Lamentations suddenly reverses in 3:21 with the words to call to mind. In Hebrew, the verse reads, "This I cause to return to my heart." The heart is not so much the place of emotions but of the mind and will. The notion here is a bringing back through conscious thinking so as to change the whole perspective on the situation. A new and deep realization begins here out of the deep despair and unanswered questions to God. A new hope is found that causes the writer to look beyond the current situation and move past the pain.

Conversation

We can, at any given moment, find our faith stretched far beyond anything we have ever experienced or imagined. No matter how strong we feel our faith is, we have those, "Why me?, why now?," moments. The strength of faith is found in our moments of weakness. In these moments we become brutally honest and cry out to God sharing what we are experiencing in the midst of our trials and tribulations. The crying out which is more like a screaming yell serves as a catalyst, calling us to go deeper in our faith journey. In these moments we recognize the cause of our personal as well as our collective pain.

As we work our way through these moments we find that we are involved in a process that allows our faith to grow and mature. It is a process of not allowing oneself to become so overwhelmed by something that one cannot recall what God has already done. When we take the time to consciously recall the many situations God has brought us through, as well as the victories of the past, we discover new perspectives. Though the circumstances may not change, we know our hope in God is real and that is what allows us to keep, "hanging on by a spider's thread."

Questions

1. What is your most recent experience of crying out to God?
2. What were your initial feelings towards God?
3. What were you seeking from God?
4. When did your perspective on the situation begin to change?
5. What did you do to begin to see God in the situation?
6. What was brought to your attention?
7. What did you learn from the experience?
8. How has your faith been strengthened to keep holding on by a "spider's thread"?

Home Court (Dis)Advantage

Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.

Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)

30 June 2019

Prayer

Sometimes home hurts, God. It is not always a place of encouragement and joy; sometimes it is a place of judgement and sadness. Our Father, Our Mother, God: sanctify the places we find and call home, that they may be spaces through which your Holy Spirit moves, bears fruit, transforms, and gifts us. Lead us to the new communities and homes where we will find your justice and peace as you see fit. In the name of all that is holy: Amen.

Scripture

Mark 6:1-13

Contemporary Context

2014 Pew Research Center data reports that 79% of Blacks in the United States identify as Christian; 47% of Blacks in the United States (including Christians and those of other faiths) attend religious services at least once a week; 83% (including Christians and those of other faiths) attend services at least a few times a year. This data demonstrates that Black folks in the United States are (still) pretty religious and pretty Christian in comparison with the rest of the country. And for most of us: Black churches are home. Yet, home has some problems.

Most of us will admit that – at the very least – our homes (including our church homes) ought to be places where we can get fed. In fact, most of us demonstrate our conviction that this feeding should be both physical and spiritual. We all have church dinner stories to tell. Research on the relationship between hunger and the plight of LGBTQ people in the United States reveals shockingly high and disproportionate numbers of Black LGBTQ people who are hungry. The New York Times reports:

Food insecurity has a disproportionate effect on minorities. When asked the question, ‘Have there been times in the past 12 months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?’ the differences are striking. Nearly half of L.G.B.T. African-Americans (42 percent) answered yes, compared with 28 percent of straight African-Americans.

Such extraordinary statistics make it painfully clear that when it comes to a matter like hunger – especially as it impacts the lives of Black LGBTQ people, churches like and including the AME Church are failing to fulfill our holy mission. Perhaps, our preaching and our practices are compromising our capacities to fulfill our responsibility to find and feed those who are hungry (remembering that there was not stipulation put on which hungry people were to be fed; remembering that we are responsible to feed wherever there is hunger – especially when there is hunger along with other intersecting needs) (Matthew 25.31-46). Perhaps, we have made “home” so uncomfortable, that it is impossible for us to complete our missional tasks as churches.

Exegesis

In Mark 6, Jesus is feeling the home court (dis)advantage. Everyone knows him in Nazareth. They know that he is a working man (tektōn: a craftsman, carpenter); they know that he is Mary's son. As one who worked with his hands, his spiritual and intellectual capacities were questioned. As Mary's son, he is known according to the infamous circumstances surrounding his "virgin" birth and Joseph, his "earthly father" likely died when Jesus was quite young. The focus on these details of Jesus's identity, upbringing, and humanity made it almost impossible for him to do the spiritual work to which he was called. Jesus's home court community was "amazed" with Jesus's teaching (v.2) and Jesus was "amazed" with their lack of faith (v.6). All of this amazement resulted in a stifling of the Holy Spirit. Because the folks at "home" could not see past Jesus's first thirty years and the details of that part of his life, they missed out on miracles, healings, and the driving out of demons. Given how Jesus was treated at "home" – with a home court disadvantage – when he travelled to other places and gave power and instruction to his disciples for their traveling ministry, he advised them not to linger in disadvantageous places where their message was not received and the gifts of the Holy Spirit could not be manifested. When "home" does not have room for Jesus in his full prophetic ministry and power, Jesus has to leave home. He goes with a message to others: make home where you are welcome.

Conversation

As difficult a place as home can be – the homes of our churches and families, it can be even more difficult to talk about home. We have been told that it's not good to "air our dirty laundry." However, our silences have not protected us. In fact, our silences have compromised our sacred mission as followers of Jesus. Our silences have been as harmful, at times, as our overt acts of rejection and inhospitable behaviors. Often, we who reject others miss our blessings as much or more than we deny others of the blessings God intends to flow through us to others.

Questions

1. Tell one of your favorite "church dinner" stories that characterizes the best of what churches and church folks can be and do. Tell a "church dinner" story that embodied some of the problems with the church as our cultural and spiritual home. Tell of a time in which welcoming someone back "home" or welcoming someone new "home" in your church has become a portal through which the Holy Spirit has moved.
2. How is physical food invoked in the text? Beyond making food available to Jesus's disciples, what other appropriate expressions of hospitality does the text imply?
3. In what kinds of feeding ministries do you and/or your church participate? (If your church does not have any such ministries, how might your church and/or its members develop and/or become involved in such ministry?) Which individuals and/or communities benefit from these ministries? How? Which individuals and/or communities are left out of these ministries? How and Why? How might you expand your ministries of feeding and other forms of hospitality?
4. How might preaching and teaching – or even beliefs – change in order to ensure that we satisfy our missional responsibilities?
5. In what ways do we focus too much of our attention on identity? How does this stop and/or paralyze the work of the Spirit in our churches?

Media

"I Just Wanna Die Today" Ft. Alessia Khalid
(<https://youtu.be/Kb24RrHIbFk>)

Straighten Up and Fly Right!

Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.

Pastor, Campbell Chapel AMEC (Denver, CO)

07 July 2019

Prayer

Gracious God, the Refiner of our souls, sometimes we lean: our concern for the most vulnerable is shaky at best. Please, prop us up on every leaning side that we are straight and right according to your righteous measure for our communities and for each of us. This we pray in the name of all that is holy and just. Amen.

Scripture

Amos 7:7-15

Contemporary Context

In 1943, Nat King Cole and Irving Mills wrote the song “Straighten Up and Fly Right” based on a sermon that Cole’s father had preached using a Black folk tale as one of his illustrations. The folk tale is about a buzzard that takes other animals on joy ride flights; mid-flight, the buzzard gets hungry, throws it’s animal passenger off its back and to its death, and then feasts on the dead animal. A monkey sees the buzzard run this game a few times and decides to go for a ride on the buzzard’s back. In flight, the monkey wraps itself so tight around the buzzard’s neck that the buzzard is not only unable to throw the monkey, but the buzzard is also almost choked to death. In the song that The King Cole Trio sings, the lyrics say that: “The buzzard told the monkey, You are chokin' me. / Release your hold and I'll set you free. / The monkey looked the buzzard right / dead in the eye and said, / Your story's so touching, but it sounds just like a lie.” The Chorus continues with the message to the buzzard and the moral of the story: “Straighten up and fly right / Straighten up and stay right / Straighten up and fly right / Cool down, papa, don't you blow your top.” Straightening up and flying right is more than a notion for those of us who have become practiced in exploiting one another, in eating our prey, and in taking advantage of one another. Though we often complain about the monkeys on our backs, we rarely acknowledge our cannibalistic behaviors!

Exegesis

Amos, a shepherd and sycamore fig cultivator, likely wrote between 760 and 755 BCE. Through the book by his name, this minor prophet wrote five visions of judgement that; one of the visions of judgement is the text for this week. In the text, God shows Amos – a prophet from the Southern Kingdom (which included Judah) who prophesied to the Northern Kingdom (which included Bethel) – that God is holding a plumb line against a wall that was originally built straight to see if it is still straight; the wall is a metaphor for God’s people. God says: “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people of Israel” (Amos 7.8)

God shows Amos that there is good reason to believe that the people of Israel, metaphorically represented by the wall, are not “straight” and judgment will come on the people. Amos writes of the conditions within Israel’s society: “You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them. . . . There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts” (Amos 5.11-12). Accordingly, the Lord, who holds the plumb line fixed straight according to the force of gravity God has established, will judge and there are consequences. Cannibalistic behaviors will not fly! And, the God of mercy still offers this grace: “Yet I will not totally destroy the descendants of Jacob” (Amos 9.8b).

Conversation

People can be crooked in all kinds of ways. Sometimes crookedness looks like cruelty; sometimes crookedness looks like greed; sometimes crookedness looks like dishonesty; sometimes crookedness is being judgmental; sometimes crookedness looks like selfishness. Sometimes we misread crookedness, focusing on outward appearances and human limitations instead of matters of character. Yet, the Spirit of God calls us to straighten up and fly right – and that sometimes comes with the force like the monkey on the buzzard’s back. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6.17) cuts like a two-edged sword, evening out our leaning sides, straightening out our crooked ways, interrupting our tendencies to destructively feed on one another.

Questions

1. Where do you feel the presence of God’s plumb line in your life?
2. What places in your life line up well with God’s plumb line?
3. What places in your life are crooked? In what ways are your crookednesses similar to those that Amos points out?
4. What is sympathetic and what is concerning about the buzzard? In what ways have you been like the buzzard?
5. What is sympathetic and what is concerning about the monkey? In what ways have you been like the monkey?

Media

Straighten Up and Fly Right
Bible Theater: Amos – Plumb Line

A Crisis In Leadership

Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.

14 July 2019

Prayer

Dear God, we ask that you guide and direct the path of those who are placed in positions of leadership. In this period of history leaders whom are led by your Spirit are needed more than ever. Let it pour forth again as it did in the day of Pentecost. Amen.

Scripture

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34

Contemporary Context

At this point in history, our nation and our churches are suffering from a crisis in leadership. Those who have attained positions of power and leadership within our nation lack character, humility, compassion, a thirst for justice, or willingness to sacrifice for those they serve. Unfortunately, this is also true in many of our churches for both lay and clergy leadership. Because of this, many of those who follow these leaders have become divided and scattered, while those who are the least equipped to defend themselves are being completely taken advantage of. Corrupt leadership creates tension, mistrust, anxiety and division among those who are subjected to it. Their spirits are crushed, so they leave or scatter, and the lies they are told create further confusion and mistrust. Our world is suffering from a crisis in leadership.

Exegesis

In Jeremiah, we are provided with a picture of what bad leadership looks like. In the previous chapters, God condemns the corrupt leaders in Judah the southern kingdom. In our focus text, God identifies three crimes against the people and promises to take action to right the wrongs that have been inflicted upon them. The three crimes were: 1) scattering the flock - creating tension and division, pitting one group against another, sowing disinformation...etc. 2) sending them away - keeping people from the religious rituals, by denying them entry to the temple, not allowing them to plea for justice in the courts, locking them in prison...etc. 3) not attending to their needs - ignoring their cries for help and support, neglecting to do their duties or upholding their offices, and not administering important services and care for those in need.

In Mark, we are provided with an example of what good leadership looks like through the example of Jesus and the apostles. The twelve have recently returned from their own preaching and teaching mission and are eager to tell Jesus about their successes. They attempt to go on a mini-retreat to recharge by crossing the Sea of Galilee. But the people followed them by land and were there waiting when they arrived on the shore. Instead of sending them away, Jesus steps out of the boat and begins to minister and teach to the waiting crowd.

Conversation

What connects both of these texts is the focus upon leadership. In Jeremiah we are shown what bad leadership looks like and are assured that God does indeed see what is happening - but more importantly, assures us that things will be made right. Justice will be served upon the corrupt leadership and given to

those who have been suffering those injustices. The Gospel of Mark provides us with a contrast that depicts what authentic, caring, spirit-led leadership actually looks like. Jesus and the disciples serve as the models for this kind of positive leadership.

A metaphor is a symbolic image that uses the qualities of one thing to talk about or explain another. In both texts, the metaphor of a shepherd is used to help us understand the connection between those who lead and those whom they are called to serve. The good shepherd cares for the sheep and will even sacrifice his life to care for them. The sheep follow their shepherd and expect to be treated well and cared for by the shepherd.

Pentecost is about the coming of the spirit to dwell among the followers of Jesus Christ. When our leadership is Spirit-led it will be authentic and compassionate. As followers of Christ, every believer is endowed with the Holy Spirit and has access to Christ's divine leadership - which can equip each of us with what we need to lead others and our lives if we truly seek to follow divine guidance. Be the leader you wish to see!

Questions

1. Read through the focus text in Mark and identify at least three qualities of good, Spirit-led leadership you can find within the text.
2. How could the example provided by Jesus and the disciples be applied to the crisis in leadership we find today?
3. In what ways does the need for Spirit-led leadership effect those who are suffering and crying out for justice?

Our Daily Discipline

Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.

21 July 2019

Prayer

Precious Holy Spirit, we ask that you fill us with the light and love of Christ so that we can be more in tune with you each and every day. We pray that your love will draw us closer to you and help us re-commit to walking and talking with you each and every day.

Scripture

Ephesians 3:14-21

Contemporary Context

The distractions of modern life make it very difficult to hear and follow the voice of the Spirit in our daily lives. There are so many distractions to ignore and decisions to be made that it can be hard to listen for the Spirit's direction as we exercise our faith in daily life. Many of us either give up and settle for our weekly check-in at Sunday service, or simply wander through life feeling as if something is missing that we can't quite put our finger on. We know Spirit is calling but are unable to clearly decipher the messages we receive. In both cases, our lives lack deep joy, true purpose and the feeling of true intimacy with Christ. Many of us just fill the empty space with more "things", while others suffer from information overload and decision paralysis as we wander through life just going through the motions.

Exegesis

The Apostle Paul pens his letter to the church in Ephesus from a Roman prison. The church established there is comprised of Gentiles - that is persons whom are not Jews but have accepted Jesus the Christ as their savior and professed belief in him. Our focus text ends his discussion on belief and theology found in chapters 1-3. In chapters four through six he shifts his focus to discuss more practical matters. This final portion of chapter three is actually a concluding prayer. Pauls sums up many of the ideas he has elaborated upon in the previous discussion and asks God to grant deeper insight and spiritual power to those who follow Christ at the church in Ephesus.

The summary of this prayer reminds us that: a) all of humanity is one under God's care both Jew and Gentile, b) that power and Jesus' spirit dwell in the followers at Ephesus, and c) that they be rooted in divine love and grow to understand that depths of that love until they are spiritually full. He then closes with a final blessing (benediction) on the Ephesian church.

Conversation

Paul's prayer for the Ephesian congregation helps us understand what we should strive for if we want to live authentically spirit-led lives. In today's fast-paced age of information bombardment, we need daily spiritual strengthening of our inner spiritual selves if we ever hope to make healthy, life affirming, Spirit-led decisions. This means making daily time for prayer, meditation and study. We could make time if we truly decided to make it a priority.

If we can strengthen our physical selves then we can surely prioritize the health of our spiritual selves! Making time for Spirit will strengthen our faith and allow the love of God to become rooted in our hearts so deeply that it will spill forth into every aspect of daily life. It is in the daily walk that we truly begin to know and comprehend the depth and richness of God's love for us. It is beyond our understanding but we can sense it deep within our spirits if we prioritize daily communion with Spirit, and make it a point to just stop everything, pause, and breathe.

Jesus prayed that the Holy Spirit would come to dwell in us for this precise reason. So that we could have intimacy with God, and feel Christ's love within and around us as we walk through our daily lives. This is the true purpose and meaning behind the day of Pentecost, to root and establish Christ's love within us. But we will never know that sweetness unless we take the time to stop and smell the roses daily.

Questions

1. Take a pencil and paper and write down your typical daily routine. Now review your routine and figure out what adjustments you can make in time, or things you could probably cut out in order to prioritize time for prayer and meditation each and every day. Share your list with a friend who will hold you accountable.
2. Describe an instance when you felt in tune with the Holy Spirit and how it enabled you to make a good decision. Do you think it is possible to have that kind of intimacy with Spirit daily? Why or why not?
3. Paul prayed that the Ephesians come to know the width, height and depth of God's love (v.18), but then goes on to say that Christ's love is beyond all understanding (v.19). How do you think this is possible? Have you ever experienced it?

Maintaining Unity

*The Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.
Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

28 July 2019

Prayer

God of all of us, thank You for giving us unity in the Spirit. Create in us a will to do the work needed to maintain the unity You have made possible. Destroy the division between us in Jesus name and for his sake we pray.

Scripture

Ephesians 4:1-16

Contemporary Context

We are divided. There is division between people with different shades of skin color, different economic status, different gender classifications, different ages, different cultures, different beliefs and value systems, different world views and different worship styles. Should health care be a right? Education? Shelter? If the world has sufficient resources for all, why can't we agree to a more equal distribution? What about the church? If there is a role for everyone and we all share the same salvation, why are there so many big "I's and little "you's" in the local congregation? Can't we all just get along?

Exegesis

Ephesians is one of thirteen letters in the New Testament attributed to Paul. Most contemporary scholars believe that the letter was probably written by a disciple of Paul, and not the man himself because of the language, writing style and theology. The letter was addressed to congregations in western Asia Minor, sometime in the late first century CE, while the church was growing in number and power in the Greco-Roman world. The writer was in prison at the time the letter was written (think about that when you think about divisions in society today).

The letter addresses divisions in the church between Jews and Gentiles and attempts to promote harmonious relationships between the two communities. The first section (1:3-3:21) emphasizes the importance of the Christ event and its ability to unite Christians. We are all alienated from God and from others but in Christ we are reconciled. The ethnic identities have previously divided communities, but more important than our ethnicity, is our shared salvation through Christ.

Hearers of the word are exhorted to do the work of maintaining this unity in interpersonal relations in familial, ecclesial and social settings. Beloved, let us love one another, for whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they have seen can't love God whom they have not seen. Mature Christians are distinguished from childish ones by their thoughts, attitudes and behavior with others.

[Exegesis from the Peoples' Companion to the Bible, Fortress Press, 2010]

Conversation

The trouble with the ethical instructions in the letter is that in order to ‘maintain unity’ it seems that the writer subjugates some groups to others (wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters, Ch. 5:21-6:9). Can equality between Jew and Gentile be purchased only at the cost of inequality in other relationships? Do we not share the same obligations of love and respect towards all people no matter our social standing?

Questions

1. Are all of the members of your church believers? Does everyone in class today claim to have the baptism of the Holy Spirit?
2. Do all the believers demonstrate the same level of maturity in Christ? Are there some people who are younger in chronological age than others, but more mature in Christ?
3. Are you always humble and gentle?
4. Are you always patient with others in love?
5. Do you make every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit? Do you thrive on drama?
6. When you see other believers, do you consider them to be a part of you? (there is one body and one Spirit)
7. What are the biggest divisions in the church about?
8. Who benefits most when people are divided?
9. What does Pentecost (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh) have to do with maintaining unity?
10. What steps can we take to maintain unity in the church as a way of spreading it in the world?

Fear Not. God Is.

*The Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.
Pastor, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)*

4 August 2019

Prayer

God our God, You are amazing. Thank You for including us and using us. As we study today, we ask that Your holy spirit would dwell within and among us and be our teacher and our guide. Please help us to see You, feel You, and hear You as we study together today. Amen.

Scripture

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8

Contemporary Context

Sometimes we feel so strong and confident in our faith. We know that God is with us and we are clear about how and where God is moving in our lives and the lives of those we serve. Other times we are afraid of what we know, and what we don't know. When fear takes over it is more difficult for us to see God moving and hear God speaking. Anxiety sets in. Panic. Our breathing becomes irregular. We lose our balance. When fear has gripped us, we perceive God's silence as God's absence. In this season of Pentecost let us be mindful of God's spirit moving in ordinary and extraordinary ways at all times and in all places. Let us hear God in the silence and in the shout. While there is much to fear, our God is present and prepared.

Exegesis

In our text, Elijah has come to the wilderness hoping to hide and die. He believes he is the only faithful prophet/person left in Israel. Just before this moment in his life he has orchestrated the upstaging of Baal and demonstrated absolute confidence in God's willingness and ability to show out by sending fire to consume Elijah's water-soaked altar in the presence of the false prophets. Elijah has seen God impose a drought and deliver from drought all because of a prayer. He has seen the widow's oil not run out, and beheld the resurrected life of her son. Elijah has every reason to be confident in the work that he does for God and in God's presence and power. But Queen Jezebel, feeling humiliated, threatens Elijah's life.

Elijah is exhausted, despondent, and somewhat resentful over this turn of events, so he leaves the jurisdiction to sit "under a solitary broom tree" and asks God to let him die (1 Kings 19:4). When we are tired, it is very hard to keep fighting the good fight of faith. Rest is essential for the work.

Whether Elijah sees God or not, God sees Elijah. God's response to Elijah's protest against his very life is gradual, so unobtrusive that Elijah barely acknowledges the bread and water left by his bedside. Does Elijah even realize that God has met him under the tree? How often we miss God when we are weary and afraid. Elijah's certainty that he was better off dead comprises a remarkably certain "doubt." God invites us to take notice of what hardened beliefs rise up and obscure our senses so that we cannot recognize God's presence.

When we turn to Psalm 34:1-8 we are reminded that the presence of God is tangible. In 1 Kings 19, God invites Elijah to speak to God in the midst of his distress. The Psalm reminds us that God does deliver us from our fears when we pray. God does save us from every trouble. God does encamp around those who fear God. God's presence is so real and satisfying you can taste it like the meal the angel brought to Elijah for two days while he was asking to die. Elijah might not have found his 'happy' place, but he was restored enough to get up and keep pressing towards the mountain of God.

Conversation

Elijah feels overwhelmed because he feels like he is the only one on the Lord's side and he does not have company or help. He has forgotten that even though the enemy is busy, God has people everywhere. There is indeed a remnant!

Jezebel feels humiliated and embarrassed. I recently heard someone say that insecurity breeds hostility. When people feel like they are not important, they begin to act out. Do you know any Jezebel's? In what ways do you behave differently when you are feeling confident vs. when you feel insecure?

When our fear of God is bigger than our fear of anything or anyone else we are able to be courageous witnesses like Elijah with Ahab and the other prophets. When we start to look down and take our eyes off of God, we become overwhelmed with the waves and currents and the Jezebels. What threats have you running away instead of standing on the promises?

Questions

1. When was the last time you remember feeling afraid? What triggered the fear? How did you respond?
2. Why do you think Jezebel's threats had such an impact on Elijah?
3. Do you believe in angels? Where did the angel who touched Elijah come from? What did they do/say? Did Elijah acknowledge the presence of the angel in any way?
4. When was the last time an 'angel' appeared in your life? Did you acknowledge that it was God who sent them?
5. Elijah was totally worn out when he sat down under the broom tree. He ate two meals prepared by angels. That rest and food gave him enough energy to get up and travel for forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God. When was the last time you felt like God carried you?

Be Wise

Rev. Karen Anderson, M.Div.

Pastor, Ward Chapel AMEC (Florissant, MO)

11 August 2019

Prayer

Most gracious and loving God- open the eyes of our hearts as we study your word. Lord- make us instruments of your love. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 111; Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20

Contemporary Context

We live in a world where we are bombarded by information. We live in an age where, with just a few key strokes, we can access information about almost anything in the world. We have 24/7 access to the news via television, print and internet media sources. And yet we live in a time where journalistic integrity is constantly under scrutiny. Even sources we once felt were reliable now exist under clouds of suspicion of being 'fake news', requiring us to be discerning in determining what is truth and what is not. This overabundance of information shapes and forms not just how we view the world but how we interact with it. It's often the source many use in determining what/who is acceptable and what/who is not. But simply having access to information is not enough. We must be able to interpret and understand the information we receive. Which is why we must have a discerning spirit. One that helps us filter information based not on what the world says but on what God says about the world and how we are called to live in it. It requires us to gain wisdom that only comes through relationship with God.

Exegesis

Psalm 111 is called a Hallel, a Psalm that begins with Hallelujah and roots praise of and for God in God's works and deeds. It praises God's merciful, gracious and compassionate character. It concludes by saying the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and all who follow his teachings will grow in wisdom." The word "fear" (yara') in the Hebrew Bible, is a synonym for "love" but at its root, the word denotes obedience to the divine will. The implication is that "the fear of the LORD" is to understand that the way of being, demonstrated by God's actions, is "the will of the LORD" which we are to put into practice in our daily lives.

Proverbs 9:1-6 extols the benefits of choosing wisdom as the guide for one's life. It describes wisdom as a table which has been set before us with an open invitation for all to come, feast and be filled.

Ephesians chapter 5 begins with a call to be imitators of God and to live a life filled with love following in Jesus' example. It reminds us we are no longer to live in darkness but as people of light. Paul emphasizes the role of wisdom and understanding in the life of God's people. He admonishes us to not depend on the world, but on the Holy Spirit as the source of wisdom to help us discern God's will.

Conversation

As we navigate this information age, wisdom and discernment become ever more important in our lives. We must be able to delineate between God's ways and the world's. We are to be filled with wisdom through the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can exhibit the character of God in a world lacking in mercy, justice and compassion. There was a time when everyone wore arm bands that said, "WWJD-What Would Jesus Do?", but I've always thought the real question was "What Would Jesus Have Me Do?" Maybe this is the question which begins the quest for wisdom as we try to discern God's will. As we seek to look at the world truthfully while living in it wisely. As we 'fear the Lord' as we 'love the Lord with all our heart, our souls and our minds', we will gain insight (epiphanies) to help us process information so we can live as Jesus lived and love as Jesus loved. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit and we gain wisdom we will be producers of good fruit just like Jesus!

Questions

1. How do you define "fear of the Lord?"
2. What are ways we can grow in wisdom?
3. What does it look like to practice "fear of the Lord" in our daily lives?
4. In the beginning of chapter 5, Paul encourages us to be imitators of Christ, to live as Jesus lived and love as Jesus loved. Later in the chapter, Paul tells us to avoid interacting or associating with those labeled undesirable or sinners. As you think about Jesus' life and the call to be an imitator of Christ, what is God saying to you about how you should interact with those in your community who may be considered undesirable?
5. What is the role of wisdom and discernment in these days of misinformation and information overload?

Trusting Can Be So Very Hard To Do

Rev. Karen Anderson, M.Div.

Pastor, Ward Chapel AMEC (Florissant, MO)

18 August 2019

Prayer

Lord: help our unbelief. Amen.

Scripture

John 6:56-69

Contemporary Context

One of my all time favorite movies is the original *Miracle on 34th Street*, the black and white version with Natalie Woods. There's something about watching a young girl, a product of a very pragmatic mother, who's been taught to only believe in what can be explained, move to a place of believing in what can't be explained. It's an arduous journey and my favorite scene doesn't come until almost the end of the movie where we see her in the backseat of a car slowly repeating over and over again the words "I believe." She is hoping against hope that this trust she's placed in something she can't logically explain has been worth it. Isn't that just like us sometimes in our relationship with God? There are times in our lives when trusting and believing is a little harder than others.

Exegesis

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum after leaving the hilltop where he fed the crowd of five thousand with five loaves and two fish. The crowd, which witnessed this miracle, followed him across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum saying they wanted to perform God's miracles as well. Jesus tells them the only thing God wants is for them to believe that he is who he says he is. Now, despite what they had just experienced they ask Jesus to perform a miracle, so they can believe. They bring up the story of how manna fell from heaven during the Exodus. So, Jesus uses the passage to explain his identity. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life who gives life." This does not sit well with the crowd because they are trying to understand his words through logic and reason. How can this flesh and blood man declare that He came down from heaven? It doesn't make sense. How can we believe him? Jesus, knowing what they're thinking asks, 'does this offend you?'. Are my words hard for you to understand? Note: the word 'offend' is also translated as 'scandalize'. Jesus is asking if it is scandalous to believe he is saying is true. Then Jesus pushes them even more when He says that eating his flesh and drinking his blood will give them eternal life. They thought he was speaking literally. After all, they knew nothing about the Lord's supper, so he wasn't making any sense to them. How could Jesus expect them to eat his flesh and drink his blood? They argued among themselves, calling his teaching hard. And unable to make sense of it, many deserted Jesus that day.

The response of the disciples shows similarities to the Exodus story. Israel seemed to constantly be complaining- first asking for food because they didn't trust God to take care of them, then complaining

about the food provided. Their complaining was an indication that they didn't fully trust or believe that God was able to take care of them.

Similarly, we examine the group following Jesus from Galilee. Even though they were the recipients of the miraculous food on the mountain, and after calling Jesus a prophet, they fail to believe him when he says he is the bread of life. They doubt his words and start to argue with each other. And just like in the Exodus story, the issue is not simply that they argue, as much as it is that these arguments represent a lack of trust in God. This is shown in Jesus' response to them when he says, "some of you do not believe." The Greek word *pisteuo* is a common word in John usually translated to "believe", but it also means to trust or rely upon someone. The disciples who leave, just like the Israelites in the wilderness, fail to fully trust God's ability to provide or believe Jesus' proclamation that He is the Bread of Life that brings life.

Conversation

Jesus said, "all you need to do is believe, just trust me, take me at my word." Isn't it interesting that even though these disciples were recipients of a miracle they still found it hard to trust and take Jesus at his word? Maybe the response of the disciples provides us a new insight about the reports of the 'dying church' among mainline denominations. When we talk about the declining membership and waning participation, could it be that like the disciples in John 6, people are finding it hard to trust God and to trust the church? Perhaps, like the Israelites who found it hard to believe Jesus' teaching, those who would fill our pews are finding it difficult to connect Jesus of the Bible to the portrayal of Jesus in society.

How can they trust that we are telling the truth when we say Jesus is concerned about the poor, the widows, the orphans and the immigrants, when religious leaders remain silent about the oppression and dehumanization of these same groups? How can they trust that we are being honest when we say righteousness and justice are important to Jesus when they see the injustice inflicted disproportionately on people of color and the poor every week at the hands of those who profess to be Christians? How can they trust that we are telling the truth when we say all are equal in God's sight when we have religious leaders preaching separatism, racism and division from the pulpit? How can they trust that Jesus can provide all their needs when daily, they watch the dismantling of programs which provide for basic human needs of food, shelter and clothing while the religious community remains silent?

Trust can only happen if we make space for their questions and doubts. We must be willing to enter into authentic relationship with those who are struggling to trust in what they don't understand. We must be like Jesus- willing to walk with them on the journey. When we make space for their doubts and questions we also create space for the Holy Spirit to work. We are called to encourage those who are struggling to believe and to encourage those who want to leave to stay a little while longer. We may have to encourage them to repeat belief over and over, like Natalie Wood repeating "I Believe", until God reveals himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. We must be those who say, "Don't leave. Stay in the presence of Jesus because in time, if you feed on the Word/the Logos, as you spend time with Jesus, you'll come to know the truth for yourself." Jesus is the Bread of Life who gives life. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more our hunger increases. As hunger increases, faith and trust grow until we're able to declare like Peter, "We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God."

Questions

1. Do you think we have a 'trust' issue in the church today?
2. How can trust be renewed or restored?
3. What are barriers to establishing trust in the church?
4. How do we respond to Jesus' request for us to just believe?
5. How do we create space for those who are seeking God but doubting?

The Living Water: Is it in you?

Rev. Jarrol Taylor, Jr.

Associate, Bethel AMEC (Fontana, CA)

25 August 2019

Prayer

God, our Jehovah Jireh, you are the Provider of every need that our body, mind and spirit requires, please fill our cup with pure water of the Holy Spirit, so that our words and actions are refreshing and reviving to our brothers and sisters. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Contemporary Context

I saw a meme on Facebook the other day that read: “You can eat all the kale. Drink the alkaline water. Take the supplements. Do yoga. But if you don’t deal with the [stuff] going on in your heart and head, you’re still unhealthy.”

In this day and age, you don’t have to go any further than the cell phone in your hand to find of variety of nutritional advice, dietary suggestions, food journaling ideas, recommended daily caloric intakes, pros and cons of veganism, and advocacy for what you should and should not eat from an incalculable amount of reliable (mostly) sources. The food and beverage industry invests millions of dollars in how to market and convince the consumer to continually purchase their products whether they are healthy for the body or not. Along with this proliferation of edible-related advertisements and food channels devoted to around-the-clock salubrious temptations, has come the propagation of toxic discourse in the public and private sphere.

The decline of respectful and civil interaction between those who may have opposing viewpoints has exploded exponentially across all media spectrums and within all levels of public platforms (otherwise known as racial and political tribalism) where an earnest exchange of ideas can quickly deteriorate into venomous verbal vilifying. It has become the “new normal” for those who show compassion for the elderly, the widow(er), the orphan, the immigrant, the prisoner and the infirm, to be called “snowflakes”...or worse. We, as a nation, have fallen into what I call: “The Jerry Springer” mentality—where we have become jaded, apathetic and/or entertained by a malicious mouth or a lying tongue. So much so, that almost half of our country applauds a president who advocated violence against peaceful protesters, slanders women, ridicules the disabled, and dismisses sexual assault—all before frenzied and roaring crowds.

Exegesis

Here we find that some religious leaders from Jerusalem sending investigators to observe Jesus and report their findings...and they didn’t like what they found.

In this witness of Mark, he had to explain some Jewish rituals to a non-Jewish audience. Devout Jews had a very specific way of washing their hands and arms that reflected a traditional cleansing...one of the many hundreds of their own rules and regulations that they added to God's holy law. This cleansing was purposefully done as to wash away anything or anyone they may have come into contact with, and purify themselves before God. But Jesus saw through their worship and its true intent. The Pharisees wanted to appear holy, but their motive was to attain profit and status.

Isaiah 29:13, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote [mechanical repetition]" Jesus called them out of their façade of thinking they were acceptable to God by being clean on the outside.

Conversation

Since I was a boy, my mother has always told me to "hold my peace." I learned to bridle my tongue and be "...slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

But in our communities and the greater society at large, it can seem almost inhuman to not respond to injustice, ignorance, race and gender-baiting, racism, inequity, etcetera with retaliatory oral onslaughts of our own. And especially now that many who thrive in the cesspools of online antagonism and emboldened by the anonymity of clandestine profiles, are saturating social media at an exponential rate, it can become a daily stressor to even look at a comment and engage the adversary.

The Word tells us that out of the mouth, the heart speaks. Don't defile yourself by dwelling and focusing on evil and responding in kind, but as Philippians says: think about what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and admirable. It is inhuman to not respond in kind, but God calls us to operate in the spirit, not the flesh.

Questions

1. Do you worry about what kinds of foods you eat, but put "junk food" in your mind?
2. Do you avoid those who don't think and/or like you do because you think they're "unclean"?
3. If your voice recorded in the last 24 hours, would you play it back for Jesus?
4. What are your thoughts/feelings of the rituals/ceremonies of the church today?

Media

Listen to: "Pleasing" by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdxEF6GwLqg>

Seeking God's Face

Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D.

01 September 2019

Prayer

Precious Lord, we are thankful for your presence in our lives and the blessing it is for us to draw closer to you. Our prayer is that you help us to draw closer to you in every aspect of our lives. O' Lord, draw us closer to you! Amen

Scripture

Psalm 27:1; 4-9

Contemporary Context

In these troubled times, each of us needs some assurance that there is someone whom we can count on. The age in which we live, forces us to adjust quickly to drastic changes that are constantly occurring all around us. In the midst of these changes each of us needs an anchor, something that we can cling to when all seems to be in chaos. The Psalmist reminds us that God is that anchor if we would only draw closer.

Exegesis

The Psalms are a series of mixed reflections set in poetry and song. These reflections range from songs about the Israelite's communal life, communal worship, and official acts of praise to intimate personal revelations that discuss pain, fear, delight and hope. The main lesson is that God is a being to whom all of us can speak, because Spirit is concerned with every aspect of our lives, both individually and collectively.

Psalm 27 is primarily focused upon triumph over one's enemies and confidence in God's divine power. However, the writer also speaks intimately of his struggles with faith, and issues petitions to god for continued guidance and deliverance. In verse 1 we find the Psalmist describing who and what God is to him/her (light, salvation, stronghold), and expressing confidence in God's ability to provide protection and the courage to face fear (whom shall I fear, of whom shall I be afraid?).

In verse 4 the tone changes as the Psalmist now requests to be cared for and protected by God (dwell, behold, and meditate). This care is what is sought after most of all. In a sense the requests are really about abiding and dwelling with God in an intimate way. To know and be known by the spirit of the divine not only imparts connection and care, but protection as well (verse 5).

Verse 6 is a natural outflowing from the intimacy described in verses 4-5. The result of the relationship and care the Psalmist receives from God initiates both self-confidence (head lifted up above enemies) and trust in the divine, but also worship (I will offer sacrifices, sing, and sing praises).

Verses 7-8 find the Psalmist beseeching God for continued relationship and blessings. The verb "cry" in this case could more accurately be translated as "pray" (When I pray to you be gracious to me and answer me - v.7), while verse 8 is an acknowledgement that the writer will always seek to be in communion with Spirit (seeking God's face).

Our final verse finds the Psalmist listing the things that he/she would rather God not do. Do not: hide your face, turn away in anger, abandon or forsake. God is recognized as the one who has saved and will continue to save those who commune with Spirit no matter what the situation.

Conversation

Like the Psalmist, each of us needs to place our hope and trust in God. In our rapidly changing world, knowing that we have the love and support of a loving and caring God can make all the difference. It can anchor us in times of trouble and help us to find the courage we need to face what lies ahead with the confidence that comes from knowing that we are not alone. Superficial prayers and intermittent spiritual practices are not enough to fulfill us –especially in the difficult times. The Psalmist speaks about a faith and reliance upon Spirit that is based upon an intimate connection to the divine. This kind of faith can only come from a real and lasting connection.

We too must seek the face of God and build an intimate relationship with Spirit. It is from this intimate place of connection that we obtain the knowing and the confidence we need to go out into the world and face the days ahead with grace and confidence.

Questions

1. What areas of your life are you keeping God away from right now and why?
2. List 3 changes you could make that would help you to become more intimate with Spirit each day? List 3 action steps you could take to make those changes in the next 2 weeks.
3. Reflect upon some of the times you or others in the group felt the most intimately connected to Spirit. Are there any common themes among these times that you can take advantage of in the future?

Love Will Reveal If Our Worship Is For Real

*Rev. Rachel Williams-Glenn, M.Div., LMFT
Pastor, St. Paul AMEC (Independence, MO)*

08 September 2019

Prayer

O Great & Awesome God, remind us what it really means to love. Purge our hearts, minds, spirits, churches, ministries, fellowships, neighborhoods, communities, families, friendships, intimate partner relationships and avenues of connection to any and everything that distorts our perception so that we don't recognize how to love. Show us what love really is and then empower us to show someone else so that all of our worship can be for real. – Amen.

Scripture

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 8-10

Contemporary Context

People blame love, or the lack thereof, for things that have nothing to do with love. In the 2012 version of the movie *Sparkle*, the lead character sings a song called “Love Will” that suggests that love will lift you up and tear you down; promise you life's best and deliver life's worst. In other words, love will do more than hurt¹; it will harm². Although it appears that her song is related to her experiences with her romantic partner, the movie shows that they fit her experiences with her mother and her sisters as well. Yet, it is a love not mentioned in her song that's able to restore her relationship with her mother, her romantic partner and her dream. That love is unselfish. That love does no harm. That love restores. That love is divine. That love is the “more excellent way” that the Apostle Paul presents to us in 1 Corinthians 13. That love is what the church must share with the world if the church's worship is to be for real.

Exegesis

1 Corinthians 13 is known as the love chapter because of how “agape” (unselfish love) is highlighted within the text. Yet, few connect the text to the worship life of the Church at Corinth even though the original hearer probably did. After all, Corinth was a city where many religions were practiced. It was also a city where social status was everything. That's why Paul's references to the noisy gong and clanging cymbal would've reminded them of how such symbols were used in the worship of the God of war. It's also why they would've correctly understood that Paul was saying their gifts of prophecy was no different than ungodly worship if there was no love in their fellowship. Paul's comment about them being nothing and gaining nothing if there was no love in the fellowship would've reminded them of how Paul had scolded the more well-to-do members for rushing to eat the Lord's Supper before the poorer members could get to the table. In both cases, they would've heard Paul suggesting that their worship wasn't for real if unselfish love wasn't present within their fellowship.

Conversation

Many of us have experienced a different kind of love than that which is presented as the “more better way” of being lifted up in 1 Corinthians 13. Many of us have also made following social customs and cultural practices more important than making sure that we did no harm to those in search of the “more better way” that’s promised to believers of the Most High God. Like the Church at Corinth, we need someone to call us on stuff. We need someone to remind us that we were saved to love and be loved in ways that restore, redeem and remake us into the fellowship of believers for whom Jesus is returning. We need to know that real, true worship comes from love and must therefore give out love in order for our worship to be for real.

Questions

1. If someone else were to listen to your top two favorite songs about love, what would the songs reveal about what you think love is?
2. What does it look like for love to never give up, lose faith, stay hopeful and endure thorough every circumstance when the object of love is engaging in unjust activity?
3. What many people call “Church Hurt” is really “Church Harm” in that it results in people ceasing to experience church as “sanctuary.” What can members of fellowship communities do to change the atmosphere of fellowship communities that have gained reputations as places where church harm runs rampant?

Media

Play Jordin Sparks “Love Will” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42L5q_tMwe8) as class begins. Then, play Kirk Franklin’s “Love” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9JcZLm4UZs>) as class ends.

¹ Hurt occurs when someone or something feels pain as a result of someone or something interacting with them.

² Harm occurs when someone or something is damaged, made less effective and/or made less successful than they were before interacting with someone or something.

Restoring Grace to Our Giving Honors Our Pentecost Beginning

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15 September 2019

Prayer

Most Gracious God, may our giving reflect our Pentecost beginning. Help us, O God, to celebrate who and how you are among us by doing what we can, each chance we can, for as long as we can, for as many as we can. That way the impact of your restoring love will be felt across generations and across nations.
– Amen.

Scripture

1 Corinthians 16:1-4 NCV

Contemporary Context

We're living in an era when the church is being asked to step up to the plate and positively impact the lives of others in ways that the church hasn't had to do in a while. As government sponsored homeless shelters close, churches are being pulled into the ministry of housing those without permanent housing. As food deserts increase, churches are being pulled into the ministry of providing food to people who can't access it any other way. As people begin to live longer while also choosing to live far from family, churches are being pulled into the ministry of caring for older people who have no one else available to do so. As the US government becomes increasingly anti-immigrant, churches are being pulled into the ministry of providing sanctuary for families decimated by one or more parent being forcibly removed from the US. Churches try, yet struggle to maintain their commitment to these ministries as they also attempt to address the spiritual, emotional, mental and social struggles of those within their local fellowship.

Exegesis

By the time Paul makes the concluding comments found in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul has answered the Corinthian churches about several local fellowship issues. Paul has helped them understand that their commitment to God through Jesus Christ is more important than their commitment to the one who led them to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has helped them understand that every member's spiritual gift is important. Paul has challenged them to love each other enough to make sure that everyone among them is able to fully participate in the Lord's Supper Celebration. Paul has even challenged them to focus on loving each other unconditionally. Now, Paul asks them to be a blessing to those who made it possible for them to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul asks the Corinthian Church to see themselves as

part of something larger than their local fellowship community. Paul asks them to give what they can to help the very church community that sent Paul and the others to them.

Conversation

Most of us don't see offering time as an opportunity to be gracious. If we're honest, most of us don't even see it as an act of worship. Perhaps, that's because it hasn't been presented as our chance to pass on the love of God to others. Some of us don't even see outreach work as ministry. Instead, it's become something that we add to our reports to show someone somewhere that we're being effective. We don't see it as an act of grace because we don't feel a connection to our Gracious God while engaging in it. That has to change if we are to ever reclaim our Pentecost beginning. We must begin to see our giving and our outreach as more than something we're dragged into, forced into or compelled to do. They must become loving acts of grace given as a way of thanking God for all God has been, is and will be in our lives.

Questions

1. What could be done differently to make offering time feel like an opportunity to share the love of God with others?
2. What can a church do when it begins to feel overwhelmed by the various ministry needs it encounters?
3. How can a person who no longer feels like they're giving graciously transform their giving?
4. Do you agree that giving graciously honors the legacy of the birth of the church that took place on Pentecost? Why or why not?

Adjusting Our Spiritual Lens

Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, M.Div.

Pastor, Second AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)

22 September 2019

Prayer

Lord, we praise you for your grace and mercy that sustains us as we strive to represent you. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us in order that we may examine ourselves as worthy ambassadors of Jesus Christ. In Jesus name AMEN.

Scripture

II Corinthians 13

Contemporary Context

Too often we formulate our opinions based upon the physical senses. Judgement of other people, places and things is influenced by what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Our perceptions dictate how we view a situation based upon experiences an individual encounters. When a homeless person is observed sleeping on a bench, many label that person as lazy, lying and lowdown. If an individual carries a smell of stench, he or she is named as a poor and pitiful being. Unfortunately, the content of one's character, the contribution of an agency and the cost of an object is evaluated by gossip and hearsay rather than engagement and exploration of the circumstances. This study challenges us to "Adjust Our Spiritual Lens" and draw conclusions based upon the power that lies within us. It is our prayer for the Holy Spirit to help us to see God working in the lives of every creation.

Exegesis

The Apostle Paul writes this letter to the Corinthian Church to defend the authority given as a representative of Jesus Christ and to denounce the character bashing of his ministry by false teachers. The message comes from the Apostle while on his third missionary journey somewhere in Macedonia in approximately 55 A.D. Those often referred to as "Judaizers," {individuals who taught against Christianity}, mobilize to discredit Paul's credentials as a true ambassador of Jesus Christ. The false teachers accuse the Apostle of misrepresenting the Gospel by labeling him as a liar because of the change in his travel plans. Initially, Paul scheduled two visits but only made one additional trip to Corinth. The honesty and integrity of the Apostle was criticized as he was charged with misappropriation of funds. The plot was intended to influence the entire church to turn against God's ambassador and ultimately abandon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, the Apostle Paul presents this message to guard his character from degradation, guide God's people in the right path, and give emphasis to the power of Jesus Christ.

Conversation

Adjusting our Spiritual Lens requires believers of Jesus Christ to discern the Lord's power working in, through and around them. Discernment is a spiritual gift that allows one to sort out and recognize God's power operating in their midst. The Apostle Paul's dilemma represents the challenge of many who are

identified as women or men of the cloth. Individuals who operate as ambassadors of Jesus Christ should expect opponents with the objective to damage, demoralize and degrade their Christian Character.

Exposure to character bashing requires the adjusting of our Spiritual Lens in order to assist us to formulate and develop opinions of people, places and things based upon revelations through the Holy Spirit rather than from the opinions of others who plot and plan against those walking in the Spirit of Christ. Like the Corinthian Church, many of us need to “Adjust our Spiritual Lens.”

The Apostle Paul admonishes the church in verse 5, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith.” In order to make any adjustments in any circumstance, an evaluation or examination is required. It is necessary to look inward and unleash the power of Christ in us to express the truth. Verse 8 states, “We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”

With “Adjusted Spiritual Lens,” one is empowered to observe evidence that the fruit of the Holy Spirit operates within an individual or institution. Does love or hate abide; peace or confusion; joy or anxiety; patience or complaint; kindness or cruelty; generosity or selfishness; faithfulness or unreliability; gentleness or harshness; self-control or lack of discipline?

In conclusion, we are challenged to reflect inward by inspecting our own character and act cautiously before judging another’s character based upon the opinion of another.

Questions

1. What are practical ways to examine whether we are living in the faith?
2. After examination, what are the necessary steps to take?
3. How should we react to gossip/hearsay about a leader in the church?
4. How should we react if we are subjected to personal character bashing?

Instruments of Inclusion

Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, M.Div.

Pastor, Second AMEC (Los Angeles, CA)

29 September 2019

Prayer

Powerful and Almighty God, thank you for the power you have given us to be utilized as instruments of love, peace and joy. Surround us with your guardian angels to lead, guide and protect us as we share the Gospel with individuals of all races, cultures and backgrounds. In Jesus name AMEN.

Scripture

Ephesians 3:1-13

Contemporary Context

Many of our churches create an atmosphere that defines it as a place where only clubs, clichés and certain classes are welcome. Some so-called houses are open only to the elite, educated, and economically stable individual. As AMEs, it is necessary to express that African is our heritage and we are a body of Christ that welcomes all humankind. Unfortunately, Sunday worship hour continues to remain one of the most segregated times in our world. The church continues to set boundaries and barriers in regard to membership and even association with those who do not meet their standards. Our mindset is expressed by the cold and critical attitudes exhibited when a person of a different race, class or background enters into our place of worship. We tend to lack enthusiasm in promoting the Gospel in communities where “our kind” is not present. Many of our church locations exist in barrios, ghettos and inner city communities, yet we continue to drive in from suburbia and across the tracks with an attitude of exclusion. Jesus came into this world and eliminated the act of exclusion. Because of Jesus Christ, salvation is an inclusive gift for all. The body of Christ is a “whosoever will” institution. Therefore, we who are a part exist as “Instruments of Inclusion.”

Exegesis

The Apostle Paul writes this letter to the church at Ephesus from Rome where he is under house arrest as a result of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. The label “Gentile” was utilized in the Jewish culture as anyone of another culture or belief. Often defined by one who has not experienced circumcision. Individuals of Greek background, Samaria and other cultures were excluded from being heirs of Israel’s benefit as God’s chosen people. However, Jesus’ salvific act on Calvary broke down the barriers of exclusion and provided an “inclusive Gospel” expressing “whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord, will be saved.” Paul expresses the revelation regarding the mystery. The Apostle reveals the mystery that the Jew and Gentile would become one in the body of Christ. This mystery was manifested in the ministry represented as he fulfilled the mission of spreading the Gospel throughout the world. The missionary journeys of Paul label him as “the apostle to the Gentiles.”

Conversation

In a world of judgement and prejudice, we are encouraged to reject systems which have created bias and beliefs that limit equal access of God’s saving power to all humankind. We are urged to reject traditions

that exclude individuals based upon race, background, lifestyle or belief system. The mystery is revealed that salvation is for everyone. Jesus said, “If I am lifted up, I will draw all humankind to me.” In verse 7, the Apostle writes about “the working of the Lord’s power.” God’s transforming power is able to save the lost and left out.

It is imperative to recognize God’s gift within us to serve as an “Instrument of Inclusion.” God has blessed every believer with one or more spiritual gifts for the purpose of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul recognized his gift to teach and preach the message of Jesus Christ to other nations. We too are granted grace to serve God in a unique and divine way so that others have access to the saving power of Jesus Christ.

After recognition, God equips us to respond to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). We are mandated to share the Gospel and make disciples among all nations. The sharing of the saving grace of Jesus Christ is unlimited. Our response to spread the “good news” may bring suffering and strife but God has promised to be with us through every trial, temptation and trouble. We are encouraged to press forward by faith in a God who never fails by fulfilling the call to serve as an “Instrument of Inclusion” in the name of Jesus Christ.

Questions

1. What are some examples of inclusion in the church today? In what manner should acts of exclusion be addressed?
2. What activities encourage recognition of spiritual gifts?
3. How does an “Instrument of Inclusion” function in the body of Christ?
4. How does one who practices inclusion deal with suffering and criticism?

Famous or Faithful

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06 October 2019

Prayer

Dear Lord, let our speech, our efforts, our behavior and everything we say and do give You glory. Let the glory of the Lord be revealed in us. Lord, daily send Your Holy Spirit to remind us to let Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus, the Christ, Amen!

Scripture

Genesis 11:1-9

Contemporary Context

The United States of American, unfortunately, can be viewed as a modern day “Tower of Babel.” A certain race of people believe themselves to be more superior than all other groups. The men of this so-called superior race of people dominate over their women and children. They have been in positions of power for so long that they have no regard for the law of the land, and they misinterpret God’s law. They twist the truth in their favor. They attempt to take the country’s destiny into their own hands. They prefer to be famous and fake in eyes of people as opposed to being faithful and true to God. They use divisive, vitriolic language as a political slogan, “Make America Great Again,” which suggests turning back the hands of time to an era of socio-economic inequality, segregation and barbaric intimidation.

The resignation of Justice Anthony Kennedy left a vacancy on the highest court of the land. Our hope was that his replacement would be a person who demonstrates a calm temperament, is a credible citizen, and respects others regardless of gender, race, sexual preference, or socio-economic status.

Just as God thwarted the plan of the people to build the Tower of Babel, God, again, will descend in the form of God’s Holy Spirit and defeat the dastardly deeds of despicable people!

Exegesis

The book of Genesis is about beginnings. It introduces the central theme of creation. Chapters 1 and 2 list two creation narratives by two distinct literary sources. God created the heavens and the earth, light and darkness, seas and skies, air and water, land and vegetation, sun and moon and stars, and animals and human beings. God created human beings in God’s image and likeness.

According to Ronald Youngblood, “Genesis is supremely a book that speaks about relationships, highlighting those between God and his creation, between God and humankind, and between human beings.”¹ Genesis is about the beginning of marriage and family, society and civilization, and sin and redemption. Genesis is about a relationship between a monotheistic God and his entire creation,

particularly, the people he chose to be his people. It introduces us to covenant agreements and “sacrifice as a substitute of life for life.”

The “primeval history,” Genesis 1:1 - 11:26, is where our text, 11:1-9, resides. Located at the end of “The account of Shem, Ham and Japheth,” we find the words of our text. “This section provides the main reason for the scattering of the people listed in chapter 10,” writes Youngblood.² This story sets the stage for God’s redemptive work through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.

The Tower of Babel represents humankind’s attempt to be equal and/or greater than God. Instead of seeking directions from God through the Holy Spirit, they took matters into their own hands: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves...” (Genesis 11:4). Their plans were egotistical and proud. They sought domination over God’s creations — God’s world and God’s people. They wanted to sit in God’s seat.

“So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they stopped building the city” (Genesis 11:8).

Conversation

In Hebrews 11, we find what some scholars call “Heroes of Faith.” These persons are commended for their faith and trust in God. Abel is commended as a righteous man because he offered his sacrifice by faith. Noah’s faith brought on criticism and ridicule by others, but he built the ark in spite of what others thought or said, because he believed God. When the flood came, he was vindicated. Abraham is presented as the father of faith because he obeyed God and left his home when commanded to do so.

Babel means “gateway to a god.” The people in Genesis 11 used the wrong method to reach God. Faith is the gateway to our God: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NRSV).

God did not call his people to be famous; God calls us to be faithful!

Questions

1. Do current events remind you of the primeval history of the world?
2. The campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again” (abbreviated as MAGA), what does it really mean?
3. What does this text say to you: “Good leaders cultivate honest speech; they love advisors who tell them the truth” (Proverbs 16:13, The Message)?
4. Would your name be added to Hebrews 11, “The Roll of Faith?” Why?
5. Will you believe God? Or, will you “lean to your own understanding?”

¹ Kenneth L. Baker, (General Editor) and John H. Stek, Mark L. Strauss, Ronald F. Youngblood (Associate Editors), “Genesis: Introduction” in Zondervan NIV Study Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 3.

² Ibid., 23.