



Sermon
Sunday, August 30, 2020
Listen With New Ears

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight our Lord and Redeemer.

It is my joy and privilege to be with you today, to share in this worship and hear God's word and explore how we can live our mission of being light and love to a hurting world.

Each one of these readings are rich with wisdom, encouragement, lament, exhortation, hope along with space to reflect, pray and wrestle with.

Both the Romans and the Gospel passages offer guidance and structure. It lays out the do's and don'ts of being a Christian and what a follower of Jesus looks like.

It is comforting to know that no matter what we are going through that scripture can speak to us. That if we listen, really listen and apply these words they can guide our lives today. It comforts me so much to know I am not alone; we are not alone, and that God's words will get us through. --- If we are faithful!

In the Romans passage Paul shares what the qualities are for a Christian. The statements from this passage reminded me of two other passages that gave people direction and cause for peace. The Sermon on the Mount and The Ten Commandments. They are statements with periods. No additions, no if's..... No judgement, no... if they deserve it. It is not complicated and yet how many times do we want to add a BUT.... We want to add a qualifier. Yet that is not our job. It is a statement and a period. End of story.....

And these exhorts sound good in paper, however putting them into practice is a lot harder..... This is where we need God. We cannot do it alone. We see something and we say if so and so would just change things would be ok..... or if they could see their wrong doings everything would be fine.

These words from Paul, are bursting with wisdom. It reminds me of ripe fruits and vegetables of the season where the juice just drips down your face and hands, a watermelon, a Georgia peach, Michigan blueberries, Jersey tomatoes. These readings contain those words, like ripe fruit ready to eat. There is so much to savor. How ready are we to delve into these words as we do the fruits and vegetables of the season?

The more complicated parts of this text concern our relationships with those whom we find hard to love or be around. How long can you watch the news, see a fb post or have a conversation before you are set off with angst, anger and being upset????

Rochelle Stackhouse in her commentary on this passage from, Feasting on the Word said: To say that our core values include not only extending hospitality to strangers but



blessing, feeding, and refusing to take vengeance on enemies will put a strain on some within our churches, let alone on relationships with those outside the faith community. This passage is not a greeting card slogan but a call to costly discipleship.

The clauses of the first two verses of Romans set the tone for the rest of the exhortation. The type of love Paul describes here is energetic and profoundly optimistic, and rather counter cultural in nature. When one considers the competitions most popular in our society, the competition to honor one another would not even make the list.

Similarly, Paul's call to "hold fast to what is good" flies in the face of popular culture that calls us to cling to whatever we can get. While the sense of this phrase might imply clinging to something for fear of letting it go, one might also read this as "embrace what is good." Paul invites Christians to consider love and good to be the constant partners accompanying the Christian and providing context for both attitudes and actions.

Listen with a new sense of hearing these words from Paul from The Message version of scripture by Eugene Peterson beginning with verse 9:

9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

14-16 Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

17-19 Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

20-21 Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

How was that different from what you heard from the NRSV version? What jumped out at you? What surprised you?

On a macro level these words guide us in how we connect to the greater world, how we live as a community of faith. How we take our mission statement and bear witness to that. It is part of the whole and can be easier to put distance between yourself and the



pieces that challenge you and me or make us feel uncomfortable. On the macro level it is easier to keep the words at arms length, to not really be involved.

However, to hear the words on a micro level can be a challenge, they become real... close. It now comes between you and another person.... A spouse, child, sibling, parent, boss, significant other, a colleague. It can be hard and scary to listen with a new voice.

What comes to mind when you hear these words on a personal level? Do you think of them any differently?

Let me share a personal story. I was attending a bible study and there were 400 women in it. We were in a large sanctuary and the leader was giving the lecture. And her words went: "how do you have to change, how are your reactions, and actions going to change to be a leader and a Christ like follower as set forth in these scriptures?" My first reaction..... I bristled... I thought, you don't understand, you don't know what I am going through. If that person would just change..... I even got mad. I wrestled with the words she spoke and it kept coming back to me all week. I Prayed.... and I prayed hard for God to soften my heart and to let me see that person as God sees them. To see them as a beloved child of God. I realized she was right. I could not change the other person. I could not make the other person be any different than how they were. The only thing I could change was how I reacted and when I did this, I softened, and I was able to have the ability for a new relationship with that person. It was life giving for me. It was not always easy, and it is a lesson I carry every day. Yet it was so freeing. It was not me; it was God. I leaned into his strength. It was not about being right.

It is the easy response to say it that person would just change, or "those" people. However, the minute we do that, we are making judgements, blaming and not taking any responsibility in what we can do to bring grace, love and peace and hope to a relationship. Relationships are hard work. No one said it was easy. With practice and diligence, we can train ourselves to have our natural response be love. Our world needs that today. A good way to remember this is to think of the Serenity Prayer. This prayer was written by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He first preached that prayer as a sermon at a church he was serving in Massachusetts. Pay particular attention to the second verse as I read the prayer:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.



Here it is... the rarely heard second verse:

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

The first paragraph is what is familiarly known as the Serenity prayer used in 12 step programs. I hope you listened to the second verse and heard the powerful words about living in the present moment, accepting hardship and trusting in God. Sums up all the scriptures we heard today.

Do not let the negativity of this time harden our hearts. Do not let evil take hold, take responsibility.

So, I ask you....

What are some things that you can work on in response to those relationships that challenge you?

What do you need to let go of so you can be free to live a life where you are reasonably happy?

God is here, God is present, God is still speaking

God is the same God of yesterday, today and tomorrow

Let us not forget that.

May we live these words and be light and love to a hurting world.

May it be so. AMEN

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