Sermon 3-10-19

Paul Purdue preaching

Lord, in this season of Lent, Your Spirit leads us into the wilderness. Lord, perhaps nothing is more counter-cultural than Lent.  40 days. 40 days of ashes, fasting, sacrifice, repenting, realigning, testing, temptation, wilderness, word, worship, foot washing, not this cup, breaking the bread, anguished praying, self denying, cross bearing. Lent speaks the unfamiliar language of redemptive suffering. Is it grace that brought General Conference to us just before Lent? Come, Spirit, remind us that the way of suffering moves us towards redemption. Guide us through this wilderness, so that we might help others find their way. Amen.
    40 days. Ten better than a month. 10.9% of a year. Jesus tithes a tenth of the first year of the Lord’s favor with 40 days of fasting, prayer and solitude. What is Jesus doing? What is Jesus waiting for? Is this an effective use of time? Why not start healing people, doing justice, flipping over tables, or teaching? Why does the Holy Whisperer lead us to wilderness? Is wilderness only to silence our constant distraction? What good are 40 days in the wilderness?

“Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit’. The sky parted. The Holy Spirit landed, commissioned, and blessed: “You are my beloved, my  child, in you I am well pleased,” and then sends Jesus off to face the devil.

The word devil means adversary, slanderer, enemy, or acussor. The Acussor attacks Jesus’ core identity: “If you are the One who God delights in, the Child of God, the Beloved, then turn these stones into bread, feed yourself.  Stop this fasting. Why sacrifice? Take that child’s two loaves as your own, those 5,000 will want a free lunch tomorrow. Jesus, if you are beloved, prove it with some spectacular show, lots of pyrotechnics, jump off the temple spire and float down to the roaring crowd below. Hold that crowd spellbound and then use them as you please. If you are a child of God, take hold of these thrones, command these armies, rule the world. How can God’s path lead to a cross? Forget that thorny crown, wear gold and imported silk, do some good but watch out for number one.

The inner acussor always whispers “if you are beloved” seeking to challenge our core identity as children of God. Slandering grace, the devil demands we prove ourselves worthy of the Divine’s love. The devil lures us away from our core identity as beloved children of God! Maybe you have felt that self-doubting sting?

The inner acussor lures with a few devilish tricks: busyness, business, power, position, stuff, old wounds, if onlys, if you ares, oughts, musts...  We need to constantly return to wilderness, worship and the Word in order to remember who we are created to be! The world tempts us to forget: 1) we are made in the image of God, 2) God is love, and 3) we love God by loving others. The inner tempter whispers “wrap your identity in accomplishments, acquisitions, and accounts”. Jesus resists the devil’s “if you are” template: “Worship and serve God alone.”

But how often do we do the devil’s work saying, “If you are a Christian you would… If you love me you will… If you are sorry you… If you want my help then...?” How often do we conditionalize love? Do we love power more than we love others? Do we plant self-doubt in others by withholding praise, waiting on kindness, delaying forgiveness, denying justice, calculating grace, or demanding other’s first prove their worth? The devil accuses.  Love absolves. Love risks calling us “beloved” before we do the first lovey thing. Love is risky; it bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures (all things and yet with all that naivety). Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13)

Last Friday, three days after General Conference, we called together 50 young progressive clergy members, a majority of them young women. We moved around inside fear, lament and anger. The bishop came as Belmont’s guest. One young pastor shared, “Our denomination has taken on the role of the accuser, the one, who stands before God and naming others faults saying ‘this one does not fit!’” You will know the accusers by the way they wield  a sword. Accusative theology’s best perry is to divide us into a categories. A category pulls and pushes us apart, while cleverly avoiding the core issues. Forgetting that “we are made in God’s image” and “Christ breaks down every hostile dividing wall”. Accusative theology sees differences and plays them up.

Years ago, when I was a children’s minister in Kentucky, we caravaned to the Cincinnati Zoo. Beverly, a grandmother, loaded five kids into her big new Cadillac. Just out of town, she ran over some scrap metal in the road and blew a tire. I pulled off the interstate and ran back to her car. I was just opening the trunk, when an beat up old Chevy eased off the highway and pulled in behind us. A roughneck old boy got out, his jeans blackened with caked on filth, his wiry tattooed arms displayed a sun-bleached Confederate flag. He wore an old Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt cut off at the shoulders to make a homemade muscle shirt. He smelled of cigarettes and body odor. He likely had not slept all night. I eyed Beverly’s tire tool just in case. Sensing my judgy unease, he smiled a weary smile and said, “Son, you’re awful fancy there to be changing a tire.” I wore a tri-colored pink and pea-green polo shirt, top siders, an embroidered belt, and khaki shorts. The look was called preppy. I said, “Thanks for your kind offer, but I can change a tire, no problem.” He shook his head, “Yeah, I’m sure you can. But you’re going to get your britches dirty, and you are taking these kids somewhere, ain’t ya?” I said, “Yes, to the zoo!”  Do you want to walk around all the zoo day with tread marks on your pink shirt? Let me do it for you, son. Look, I am already filthy.” His logic was stellar. He eased down to the pavement and made quick work of the tire change. He wore the kind of grease that hard working folks can never get out of the crevices and cracks of their hands. I shook his hand and he laughed, “You are going to have to wash that now!” I moved up to tell Beverly all was well, and she handed me two crisps twenty dollar bills, “Give that nice man some money for his trouble.” I walked back to the man’s car with the twenties, before I could ask, he said, “No, Sir!” I leaned in to plead our middle-class case, and spotted his open container in the center console. He looked down in shame and said, “Pastor, I know I shouldn’t have that there, but l am a third shift worker, and we have been cleaning machinery all night, that I am filthy and cooling off a bit. I may not look like it, but I work with the kids at my church, some of them have it pretty bad. Now you take that money and give it to them kids, buy funnel cakes or something. After I may need a hand someday, and I think Jesus said something like, “Didn’t you change a tire for me? Now get going and buy them funnel cakes!” I later wept knowing I took on the accuser role by failing to see his sacred worth. But Jesus changed Beverly’s tire that day, after working hard all night, and letting his drink get warm.

Pink Polo or Lynyrd Skynyrd, democrat or republican, progressive or conservative, rich or poor, saint or sinner, clean or unclean, saved or lost, Methodist or congregationalist, queer or straight, married or divorced, this is the accusers language. Our core identity is in Christ. When we are angry, we employ labels that barely describe us.  I suppose I am a straight white college-educated Christian male with democratic tendencies, but I never introduce myself like that. The devil tempts us to classify and divide, to call others as less than beloved children of God called to love others with the love God offers us. The church is deeply in love with labels that exclude others and drive people away from the love of God. Let us rediscover Paul, who is the most radically inclusive figure in the Bible. (Romans 8) “So now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus has set us free … Who will bring a charge against us? It is God who acquits. Who is going to convict? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God’s right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us. Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Can trouble, distress, harassment, nakedness, or danger separate us from God?  No! For I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing!”

Perhaps God calls us into the wilderness so we can face down the false paths that tempt us to live outside of our core identity. Why take the time? Why wait to grieve and check our core identity? Why worship? Our sense of identity makes all the difference in how we live. Thirty years ago, I entered the wilderness, fearing hell itself, unsure what was next but feeling the Spirit’s disquiet pushing me out of fundamentalism. I had to die to my projected identity as future Southern Baptist mega-church pastor. I entered an uncertain and unproductive land, but in that testing desert, I found my core identity apart from oughts, musts, shoulds, and if you ares. I discovered that I was beloved, not for what I do for God, but simply because God’s nature is love. The Word, wilderness, and worship lead us to a core identification with the crucified love of God.

40 days in the wilderness may seem like a long time. After General Conference, it may feel a bit like we are doing nothing, thinking about plans, reaffirming our identity as Belmont United Methodist Church. I do not know our next step, and this inner work might seem as effective as writing in rainbow chalk on the sidewalk “You are loved”.  Someone emailed me that they burst into tears seeing the rocks of our sidewalk crying out, “You are loved”. And given the right core identity, who knows what else God might do through us as we bump around inside the wilderness! Amen.