

Sermon 2-9-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Before the boys were born, someone gave us a 4" thick, 573 page guide to our baby's first year. These days, I imagine someone has invented a parenting app, with location services that can gently chirp suggestions to help you coax a frightened toddler from the top of a McDonald's playland, as you nurse a second child. After our second child, it became crystal clear that although we loved each child with the same love, we would need to parent each child differently. Our firstborn, Lewis, always answered yes. Suggest a rule and Lewis kept it. Lay a shirt on the bed; Lewis put it on. Caleb selected his attire well before he mastered completed sentences. My mother made Caleb a green and yellow dinosaur outfit. The hood had eyes and fierce terry cloth teeth. An exoskeleton of sewn triangular felt armor ran down the back along a stuffed tail that drug the floor. Three years old, Caleb wore it for four weeks straight. That included one Sunday to church. Over the years Caleb worshipped wearing a Titan's jersey with railroading overalls, green striped baseball pants, Superman cape, clip-on plaid tie and t-shirt. Lewis wore the cute little suit Connie laid out on the bed. I just sighed seeing Caleb worshipping as Batman or the boy's own handmade design deemed Baby Robin. As pastor I was already at work every Sunday when Connie got the boys ready for church. Children are unique. So we whispered different words and warnings in each child's ear. The thing is that sometimes children believe that these differences in parenting mean we love one child more than the other. We do not. Our unique children just require our same love to use differing approaches. Now, if we are unique children of God, beloved by God who is manifest in the three part harmony of Creator, Christ, and Comforter, then perhaps God woos, chides, and guides each of us in slightly different ways.

Our baptism liturgy asks:

Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these people now before you in your care? We answer: With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround each other with a community of love and forgiveness, so that we may grow in our service to others. We will pray for one another, that we may become true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.

Have we, Methodists, lost our sense of duty to nurture one another? Are we awed by God's creation, love, and forgiveness and thereby more humble, human and united? How well are we nurturing one another, forgiving one another, and living together inside the example of Christ? Are we caught up in complaints, camps and judgements: or lost in wonder, love, and praise?

Have we forgotten Paul's words to the church in Corinth: "Brothers, sisters, siblings, are you still babies in Christ?.. For when jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? When someone says, "I belong to Paul," and someone else says, "I belong to Apollos,"

aren't you acting like people without the Spirit? ... The one who plants and the one who waters work together... We are God's co-workers! ... We are servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. So, do not pronounce judgment.

(adapted 1 Corinthians 3-4)

2 Peter 3 comments, "make every effort to be filled with Christ's peace—pure and faultless. Consider the Lord's patience. Our dear friend and brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of these things in all his letters. Some of Paul's remarks are hard to understand, and people twist them just as they do the other scriptures." Wait a minute, does the Bible teach that Christian people can see things differently? Does Paul have one wisdom and Peter another? Could it be that we do not all need to see it the same way?

Do we hear Jesus' promise from our passage today that God honors our human insights, bindings and loosening? Jesus assures us that what we fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Does that empowerment not give us pause? Has it ever struck you that the disciples wrote all the New Testament, and wrote half of it after Jesus ascends to Heaven? Maybe Jesus is saying, "if you loosen up a rule or two on earth, it will be loosened in heaven." That seems to fit with an image of a loving God who did not send down another set of rules, but came to live with us. (And know), "that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them." Wait a minute, Jesus, what if two or three over here, see it one way while two or three, over there, see it another way? Jesus, how could you be with both theological camps? Was the Greatest Commandment a creed to believe or call to love God and neighbor?

I lament that American popular Christianity seems to believe that there is only one true orthodox camp: that camp being whatever camp you happen to belong to. We have lost touch with Paul's dictum "we know in part" (1 Corinthians 13). Wesley adds, "it is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding, that we will be of several minds in religion... to be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity." Wesley pleads for unity not through theology but manifest by acts of love. In Catholic Spirit Wesley begs, "Love me. Pray for me. Provoke me to love and good works. Love me not in word only, but in deed and truth!"

Now I want to be clear. We must raise our voices against evil, injustice and oppression. There can not be unity through punishment, defrocking, and exclusion. The Traditional Plan, our current common rule, banishes pastors for invoking God's blessing on queer couples inside a church. It requires bishops to stop queer people from serving God. Some of our traditional Methodist siblings feel wounded for our saying "you have done harm". I am sorry you feel this way, but please remember, you are not facing removal for living out your convictions. Churches like Belmont are not stopping centrists or conservatives from enacting your sense of mission, even as you tell our gay people to get married or ordained outside our church. Please do not cry of your woundedness when you asked us to graciously leave the church family, and we say no! If my words hurt, I ask you

to love us anyway, and we will work to love you, even as you prohibit us from living our convictions, for love is our common mission and calling.

But I have a deeper grief than this Methodist one. I grieve that we Methodists have lost our chance to bear witness to a divided nation of how to lovingly disagree and work together. I imagine that breaks God's heart.

I do not know when we all started believing we had a monopoly on Jesus. Maybe it always happens whenever the Spirit of the living God gets reduced to historical accounts. Jesus indicates as much in Matthew 23:29-36. Did it happen when the church divided by preferred language and empire into Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic in 1054? Did it happen when Martin Luther suggested 99 reforms and was excommunicated in 1520? No matter the cause, if Jesus is with us whenever two or three of us gather, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, lift the cup, or welcome the stranger, then Jesus must be over here with our camp, and working over there in that camp as well. God might be loving and wooing us in different ways.

Our Jewish cousins may do this better than we do. They understand that dialogue is a sacred activity. Our passage hints at this, as Jesus and the disciples ask and answer questions. Jesus taught the deepest truths with parables instead of rules. Christ's greatest moments appear in marvelous word pictures that defy legal definitions: laid in a manger, flight to Egypt, widow's mite, woman at well, calling tax collectors, touching lepers, healing the sick, opening blind eyes, sharing the cup, bearing the cross, resurrected into life, sending Magdalene to preach, coming through locked doors, inviting Thomas to put his fingers in the healed wounds, shining on Saul, within Teresa's palm, warming Wesley's heart, here with us today, as two or three of us gather in Christ's name, and with others understanding it a little differently over there.

In the Talmud, our Jewish cousins recorded the debates of the old rabbis. They included the minority opinions knowing that dialogue in itself opens us up to God. There is a question about the commandment to not bear false witness. One scenario involves a bride on her wedding day. Traditionally family and friends dance around the couple so the newlyweds know the blessing of a community encircling them. One of the old folk songs praises the bride's beauty and so someone asked the Sanhedrin, "Can we sing of the bride's beauty if she is not beautiful?" Well, Rabbi Shammai asserting that the importance of truth answers do not lie, "if she is not pretty, you don't tell her she is pretty." Rabbi Hillel answered, "a bride is always beautiful on her wedding day." The Talmud sides with Hillel, but records Shammai's emphasis on the truth as well.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, writes, "In the course of a discussion about the origin of the afternoon prayer, the Talmud refers to Isaac who 'went out to meditate in the field toward evening' and concludes that 'meditate' must mean 'to pray.' However, the Talmudic Hebrew, can also mean 'conversation is a form of prayer.' That is a startling and powerful idea. A genuine encounter with a human other can be a prelude to an encounter with the Divine Other. The disciplines required are the same: to be open, to listen as well as speak, to be capable of empathy and humility, to honour the other by an act of focused attention. Nor is this a minor matter. The greatest command of all,

Shema Yisrael, literally means ‘Listen, O Israel.’” (www.chiefrabbi.org/articles/other/jc.htm)

Must we force each other into the same understanding or can we believe in God bigger than our limited insights? Dare we believe in Christ while we confess we know in part? Perhaps, it is time for one more division into separate camps. I know God will be working in each camp. I believe God did not abandon the Methodist Episcopal Church South, even as God grieved that Southern Methodist broke away from the North, so that a bishop could keep holding slaves. Southern Christians used Bible verses to solidify support. So if our deepest core convictions about Jesus, the scriptures, love and justice cause us to come apart over who can marry or answer God’s call, then let us resolve to love each other even as we part. We must all live into our core convictions. So love us. Pray for us. Provoke us on to good works. Love us not just with your words but with your deeds and in truth. And will strive to love you. Pray for you. Provoke you on to good works. Loving you not just with our words but with our deeds and in truth. Love is our mission. Amen.