

Sermon 9-13-20

Paul Purdue preaching

When I arrived at the wedding venue, the best man shared that his only assignment for the wedding day was to keep Josh happy. That was not an easy task. It seemed like Josh was not happy unless he had a drink in his hand. Everyone seemed preoccupied with making sure Josh did not make a scene; apparently it had happened before. Everyone, including myself as the celebrant, heeded the memo and wore a black suit. Josh wore a white coat. He could not wait an hour to enjoy the beautiful catered meal. Tired of hearing Josh's complaining, the groom snuck into the kitchen and slipped out with a fruit plate just to get Josh to shut up. During the wedding, Josh slipped away from the other groomsmen, ambled down the aisle and sat down on the front row right beside the mother of the bride. Somehow everyone found this adorable. I'll admit, I found it adorable, too. You see, Josh was a baby.

What will we do to accommodate a baby? Do you raise your voice an octave and simplify your grammar? Do you babble? When they cry, we try to find out why. When they shout, we try to figure it out! So when Josh squirmed out of his dad's arms and made a beeline for the mother of the bride, we all laughed! After the wedding, I did not congratulate the mother of the bride on gaining a son, but spoke to her smiling grandchild who was happily chewing on a frozen teething ring, *"Oh, he's a little fussy because his little teeth are coming in. But you did not scream, did you?"* When did we lose this deep patience for one another?

We are divided. We are divided as a denomination. We are more deeply divided as a nation. We are lacking love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. The divisions can awaken us to needed change like lunch counter sit-ins or Jesus' flipping over the temple tables. And yet the tension and division can stir up spiritual anxiety: fight, flight, freeze. Traveling to South Carolina, a truck passed me on the interstate. As if it was in a parade, it was covered with bumper stickers and flew political banners like flags behind it. The truck stirred up my anger. At age 18 in 1984, I voted for Ronald Reagan. I hope no one cancels me for that. Nothing is simple in politics. The IRS Code alone is 7,500 pages long. No party has a monopoly of good or bad ideas. But let me confess, I am struggling to see how anyone who cares about morality can support a leader who is transactional, a mocker, vulgar, and perpetually dishonest. And yet, I know people do not always understand me. I was walking into a rural Wal-Mart in South Carolina and two camo-wearing greeters snickered, pointing at my festive yellow socks or maybe my heart shaped rainbow t-shirt. One giggled, "And them socks!" I briefly considered pointing out the ineffectiveness of camouflage in a parking lot. Instead, I let the barb fester. Did the banner bearing truck judge me? Did the greeters give me a second thought? Who knows? But those encounters got under my skin, or to be more Biblical, into my heart. Maybe you too have felt a generalized spiritual ick, anger, or emptiness? How do we demand societal change, while tending to our souls?

Preaching at Scarritt Bennett, Rev. Heather Harriss quoted Karoline Lewis, *“Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed.... forgiveness in this sense is freedom, freedom from the past, freedom for the future, the kind of freedom God wants for each of us. Forgiveness is an act, and an art, that we work at again and again.”* Heather went on to share, *“Forgiveness is not ignoring wrong-doing, forgiveness is opening our hearts to the incomprehensible love that God has for us. A love so full of mercy and compassion that it provides healing and consolation. A love so big, it frees us to live for a future that is not haunted by the past, frees us to live in the present, with hearts open to being a part of God’s beloved community.”* Heather, that sounds like “a seventy times seven” sort of love.

“Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person's actions or attitudes in our lives. Forgiveness is not an excuse for unjust behavior and to forgive is not necessarily to forget. Some events and situations we should not forget (like the holocaust, slavery, {George Floyd} or on a personal level, infidelity).... Forgiveness is a conscious choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound to hold us is trapped and broken.” (Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn and Marjore Thompson in Feasting on the Word.) Love to the 7 times 77th power is a deep release.

I got stuck in anger as that truck passed. What do you do when your soul is irritated? Jesus sought spaces for prayer. What heals an icky angry soul? Mother Teresa says that *“without silence (or solitude) it is impossible to hear from God”*. I turned off NPR News and used the windshield time to listen to music. I sought a song by the Avett Brothers, but could not remember the name of the tune. Siri was little help; Connie was asleep. Neuroscientist Kiminobu Sugaya tells us that when we listen to music *“lots of different parts of the brain light up”*. Silent for two hours, I began to wander into my soul and a kind of involuntary prayer for my opponents. Where was my compassion for people so broken they self-identify, via bumper sticker, as “deplorable”? Where was my generosity towards those camo-clad greeters likely paid minimum wage to stand for hours in 95 degree humidity ensuring we all wore our masks? Why did I judge them so harshly? Why did I look down on them? How can we treat our neighbors as we love to be treated when we seem to disagree so deeply? Is our only hope converting others to our side? Can we shout people to our side? Can we tolerate injustice as the price of getting along? Will we separate into like-minded, rural-urban, red-blue, or other clusters? Will we ignore our divide?

I did not find the Avett Brothers’ song until the next morning, but we had 2 more hours of driving.

When my body won't hold me anymore
And it finally lets me free
Will I be ready?
When my feet won't walk another mile

And my lips give their last kiss goodbye
Will my hands be steady?
When I lay down my fears
My hopes and my doubts
The rings on my fingers
And the keys to my house
With no hard feelings
When the sun hangs low in the west
And the light in my chest
Won't be kept- held at bay any longer
When the jealousy fades away
And it's ash and dust for cash and lust
And it's just hallelujah
And love in thoughts and love in the words
Love in the songs they sing in the church
And no hard feelings
Lord knows they haven't done
Much good for anyone
Kept me afraid and cold
With so much to have and hold
When my body won't hold me anymore
And it finally lets me free
Where will I go?
Will the trade winds take me south
Through Georgia grain or tropical rain
Or snow from the heavens?
Will I join with the ocean blue
Or run into the Savior true
And shake hands laughing
And walk through the night
Straight to the light
Holding the love I've known in my life
And no hard feelings
Lord knows they haven't done
Much good for anyone
Kept me afraid and cold
With so much to have and hold
Under the curving sky
I'm finally learning why
It matters for me and you
To say it and mean it too
For life and its loveliness
And all of its ugliness
Good as it's been to me
I have no enemies
I have no enemies, I have no enemies, I have no enemies

<https://www.theavettbrothers.com> @ “No Hard Feelings” on True Sadness with permission)

In our Roman’s 14 passage Paul preaches, “*Welcome* (fetch, take hold of, partner with, Amy-Jill Levine tells us the Greek “welcome” is much stronger and proactive than “tolerate”*) *Fetch the person who is weak in faith—but not so that you can argue. One person holds an accepting faith, while weaker Christians need more rules. Do not look down on each other. Do not judge, because God has accepted us all. Who are you to judge God’s people? Those folks over there will stand or fall before the Lord. And they will stand, because God empowers them to stand! Oh, we don’t live for ourselves. We don’t die for ourselves. We live for the Lord. We belong to God. We all belong to God so why judge another child of God? Why do we look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. It is written that “every knee will bow and every tongue will give praise to God.” Each of us will give an account of our living. So, stop judging each other. Instead, try to never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of your brother, sister, or sibling.* (*Amy Jill Levine in “The Jewish Annotated New Testament”)

Let’s be clear, Paul holds strong opinions. Paul does not back down even as he calls us to fetch people who see things differently. We welcome them not for an argument but “*because God has accepted them.*” We love those we disagree with not because of what they believe or do, but because of who we understand God to be. God accepts all of us; God loves all of us. If we live, move and have our being inside God’s Love, then Love grabs hold of us and we love others. If we abide within God’s Forgiveness, that forgiveness releases us to release others. Love can sting like a judgement. Love can painfully open our eyes, as did the murder of George Floyd. And so maybe we must oppose Peter to his face (Galatians 2) or flip over tables in the temple, and yet forgiveness-love-welcome asks us who we will be. Forgiveness is rooted in our understanding of God, not in the people who offend us. We don’t live for ourselves; we live for God. We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. And pulled by perfect Love, every tongue will get lost in wonder, love, and praise with no hard feelings.

So I walked into that same Wal-Mart. The same camo-clad greeters stood in the heat. My t-shirt read “Love your neighbor.” I spoke the obvious, “It’s hot out here.” Acknowledging me one said, “Sure enough,” and the other added, “Thank ya’ for wearing your mask!” Should I mention yesterday’s socks? “You too, thanks for reminding us!” I checked and was wearing pink socks from the same festive collection. Driving home, I daydreamed. I wondered if after I shook Jesus’ hand, hugged mom and dad, and got my eternal diploma, if sometime during eternity, I might look up those two camo-glad greeter guys and see if they are still stuck in camo or perhaps embracing happier socks? I want to be patient, peace-giving, kind, generous, gentle, loving, true, and self-controlled even when I need to get in Peter’s face or flip over a table. Holding onto an icky, angry, or empty unforgiveness kills me and those around me I love. I want to release my soul into forgiveness. I want to taste a Love beyond comprehension: love to the 77th power. So what if I offered everyone I encountered the grace I knew to give

to a teething toddler carried to a wedding? What if I loved people like Jesus did? What if I forgave people, not because of who they are, but because of who I know God to be? Who knows, I might get arrested, crucified, be misunderstood, and maybe run out of town, but perhaps I might die with forgiveness on my lips and step into nothing but faith, hope, and love. Amen (*may it be so in my living*)