

“Respecting Others”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, February 4, 2018

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

I Corinthians 9:16-23

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Holy Spirit. I pray that You would take the words that each of us have within us, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from Scripture, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. I ask that You bless and transform all of these into one word, the living word of Jesus Christ, and I pray that that word of Christ would work in our hearts and grow in our souls. Guide our tongues and our thinking that it would help us to be ever more faithful as Your people in the ordinary things of life. I pray this in Christ's name, amen.

This last week, I had the privilege of being on retreat in Denver. For a week, I was able just to mull around and go to different places. I have a free tram I could get on, and go up a couple blocks, and get off, and go explore another area, as long as it wasn't 22 degrees below zero, which it felt like at times. And while I was doing that, I kept thinking about this Bible passage and preaching on it, and I was also chewing on this experience that I had the week before. One of the privileges that I have by having all these screws and rods in my back is that I get to go to the doctor's office fairly regularly. And I'm transitioning to a new physician, and so I went for an appointment early one morning at 7:30. And it's one of those facilities where there's probably 25 or 30 doctors, and there's one sort of main reception area, a huge waiting room, and then you get called out to go and follow whoever to get to where you need to go. I happened to be sitting against the wall on the far side of the reception area when someone came out. The door opened automatically, and I heard, rrr. And I perked up, and looked around, and was wondering if rrr was me, and no one else was moving. And she said, then, "David," and I'm like, "Oh, hi!" And I started to walk towards her, and she turned around and started to walk down the hallway. And I hurried up because I didn't want to get left behind, and I finally caught up to her, and she turns right. We walked down another hallway, and then she

turns left and we go down another hallway, and then there's an open door. And she takes whatever paper she has in her hand and kind of makes the gesture, like, "Come in," and so I go in. And she said, "Did you bring your films?" and I said, "Oh, yes," and I reach in my bag and pull out my little DVD, and I place it on the table. And she says, "Well, the doctor will be right with you." And I said, "Thank you so much. I'm David. How's your day?" And she didn't say anything. She just walked away.

And for a whole week, I've been chewing on that, and thinking about it, and having all of those negative thoughts inside of me that, to be honest, it just hurt my feelings. Not once did she [look?] look at me and see me, a person, who's there because they're in pain and needs help, who's afraid, who's new. I mean, I was afraid I'd get lost in the maze, let alone whatever they may or may not do to me, and this was 7:30. "The doctor will be with you shortly," and like 32 minutes later, shortly-- yeah, okay. So all week, I've been chewing on this thing, and I'm like, "That's sort of what Paul's talking about when he talks about, 'I become a Jew for the Jews to win the Jew, and I become like one under the law to win those.'" And the sort of sense of Paul being a chameleon is that what he's saying is that, no matter what's going on in your life, he's going to come beside you, and be present with you, and have conversations with you, however you want to have the conversation. In our modern language, Paul would say, "You know what? If you're a Republican, I'll be a Republican for you, and I will come and sit beside you. And if you're a Democrat, I'll be a Democrat, and I will come and sit beside you. If you're a conservative Christian, I will come and sit beside you as a conservative Christian. And if you're a flaming liberal, I will come and sit next to you as a liberal, and we will talk about liberal causes because I want to get to know you and what's going on in your life and your heart, and we're going to engage in fellowship together because underneath all of our divisions is in fact our unity and the love of God." I think that's what Paul is trying to get us to hear, is that we don't need to be self-protective, self-focused, self-righteous, self-fill-in-the-blank. He's inviting us to realize that the other people in front of us are actual, living, breathing human beings who have a story, and who have an experience, and who we need to engage with.

Now, I wish that the person who showed me into the room had stuck around just a little bit longer because I would have loved to have known how their day had started because I'm thinking it didn't start very well if, at 7:30, we're already kind of in the mode, the machine thing. So all week, I've been chewing on this, thinking about it, thinking, "Okay, this is going to fit beautifully." I get back, and I start to read the passage again, and I think to myself, "Oh my gosh, this passage sounds just like an angry pastor during the congregational meeting, when they're talking about how much they're going to pay them the next year." There's all of this sort of affirm-- I do this. I do that. If I do this, it's okay. If I do that, it's okay. If it's my own will, I have a reward, but if it's not, I'm entrusted with the Gospel. What is my reward? All this language, I, I, I, I, I-- it's all about Paul. It's all about Paul, and I thought, "Why on earth is he doing that?" And then the light bulb went on because he's not with them, the people in Corinth. He's somewhere else, doing his ministry, starting other churches, engaging with other communities of faith. He's heard from somebody that they've got some issues about something that's going on, and so he needs to respond to those issues by writing them a letter, and that's what we have. We have this letter. And so the reason I feel like he's so focused on what he's doing, I, I, I, is because he's not there. He's not a part of that community. And as I was thinking about that disconnect that Paul has with the people in Corinth, I sort of had this question, like, "Okay, but how would I write this? How would Karen and I sit down one afternoon and rewrite this verse as people who are committed to being part of the congregation who are in the thick and thin of life with all of you? How would we write this as if it were for us or from us? All of us." And this is what I came up with.

If the church embodies God's love, this gives us no ground for boasting for an obligation is laid upon all of us. And woe to us if the church does not embody God's love. For if we do this of our own will, the church will have a reward, but if not of our will, then the church isn't trusted with a commission. What then is our reward? Just this. Then in our embodiment of God's love, the church may make God's love free of charge, so as not to make full use of our rights in God's love. For though the church is free with all respects, we have made ourselves a servant to all, so that the church might win more people to us. And then, I did not translate the Jews or the people under the law into contemporary terms but you get the idea. If you're a Democrat, if you're a Republican,

if you're this, if you're that, we need to accommodate those things. We need to make space for you at the Lord's supper. Space for you at our worship Space for you in our fellowship times, in our education. Whatever it is, we need to accommodate that and make space for it. To the weak, the church becomes weak so that the church might win the weak. So whether you're strong or weak, we, the church, need to become like you in order for us to have the kind of fellowship and advocacy that we one in showing people's God's love. The church has become all things to all people so that the church might, by all means, save some. The church does it all for the sake of God's love so that the church might share in and participate in the blessings of God's love.

So retranslated, this passage sounds very different. Instead of proclaiming the gospel, we're talking about embodying God's love. Instead of I, I, I, it's us and we. What God is inviting us to be aware of. Us to be sort of promoting. Us to hear as the spirits speaking in our hearts. And what I realized as I was sort of holding that, is that I was looking at that in my head, I was looking at that beautiful baptismal bowl. And I thought about the process that we take as adults, not so much as children. But as adults, when we're baptized, as not little children, maybe a little bit older, we come to that bowl which symbolizes dying to self and rising to Christ and being cleansed of all of our worries and our sins and our fears. And then we kind of come out and we exit that into new life, the Bible says. Life, death right here, and then, new life. And I'm thinking is that in a sense, there's this progression from being self-serving and self-accepting, and as we get closer to this, we realize that we're loved by God but that's still about me being loved by God. But then when we're in the water or being touched by the water, and that sense of dying to self and rising to Christ, there's a transformation that occurs. And as we move out of that bowl or that experience of baptism, out of that remembering our own baptism, as we move beyond that, instead of self, self, self, now it's other-oriented. We become other-accepting, other-serving and other-loving.

That's the transformation that God wants us to experience. And in a sense, that's the transformation that Paul's talking about when we become Jews for the sake of the other. We don't stand over there and say, "Hey, I'm a Christian. You need to believe just like me." No, we stand over there on the other side of the bowl and invite people to come and experience whatever it is God will do in their life, not in ours. Our experience is not the way. Christ is the way. And the invitation for us is to make space for people as they come forward and say, "These are my gifts." The beauty of this is we're going to do that in a few minutes as we welcome new members into the life of the church. The church has opened its arms, its table. It said, "Come join us. Welcome. Be a part of us." And these folks have said, "Okay, I'll be a part of you." Because they too are making that journey. We're all kind of making that journey. Hopefully, we've done in existentially. But in reality, it's sort of this rhythm that keeps happening as we think, "Oh, wait. [Don't?] trying to defend myself too much. I got to stop and be more attentive to who's in front of me and love them for who they are." So all of these sounds, I don't know, hard or simple. I'm not sure for you how it strikes you. But I was very humbled this morning. I've been thinking all week about preaching this sermon. I've been thinking all week about this passage. I've been thinking all week about the nurse.

And this morning, at 8:15, Jane Evans came to service in the chapel. And last week, Jane asked me a question about our congregational meeting and what we're going to do with our endowment fund. Because of her question, we're going to have a sort of different take on what we do with the funds. And Eric Martin will explain that later at the congregational meeting. But I was so excited to tell her what was going to happen. I walk right up to her right at the back of the church and I'm like, "Jane." And she said to me, "David, this is my--" and I said, "You won't believe it. Because of your question and other stuff, we sent Eric and his team look at it and we got everything's changed. So at the congregational meeting, instead of doing the voting thing, we're going to do something else." And I explain it all to her in the frazzle. And when I'm done, she's still standing there smiling and she says, "My daughter [laughter]." And I looked at her daughter for the first time and said, "Hello. Welcome." And then I walked back up and parent-led the prayer of confession and offered a moment of silence. And I stood there and went, oh, my God, I just did it. What I'm preaching against, I just did it. I did not see her. I saw only my desire to share something. So this is not easy. It's sort of within us to be self-conversant if you will. And I think what Paul is trying to get us to do is to let that settle. Let it settle so that we actually are able to hear each other, see each other, and most importantly, love each other. Amen.