

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Doing Unto Others”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, November 3, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Isaiah 65:17-25

Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the centre, eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents, shall come to an end together, says the Lord.

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring a grain-offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the Lord.

*For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the Lord,
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the Lord.*

And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

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 Spirit. I pray that you would take these words from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, and from the prophet, Isaiah-- the words we offer in song and in prayer, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all of these words, plus whatever words we bring with us this day. And by the power and mystery of your Spirit, touch, bless, and transform these words into your word, the word of goodness, the word of peace, the word of grace, the word of Jesus Christ. And let each of us as we have need, hear that word for us. Let your Spirit do this for us this day. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

So one of my pet issues, as you know from hearing sermons in the past and from the children's sermon today is, what voice do we hear the Scriptures in? Whenever I come to a passage like this, especially an oracle of the Lord that's located in a prophet in the Old Testament, I hear it as if Charlton Heston, himself, is standing upon some rock, raising some staff, lightning is thundering around him, and the booming voice comes out and says, "I'm about to create new Heavens and a new Earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." I don't know why I hear it that way. I was not raised in the Church. I was not tormented by flannelgraphs or grams or whatever they're called, where you have to cut out animals and stick them on a board. I didn't hear about the Ten Commandments, or Genesis, or anything until I made it to college, and was handed a Bible when one of my friends heard that I was going to be baptized. I knew nothing about the Bible, and nothing about the faith. When the voice of God called to me-- and it could be that my image of God comes from that call.

It was a dream, and in the dream I was a small, naked, afraid child running in a field that was wet and slippery. It was dark and cloudy and rainy, and I kept running and running and running, and came to the edge of a cliff. In talking to one of the Jesuits at the school that I was at, I learned to not be afraid of this dream, to let it play out. So one night, when I got to the edge, I jumped because the terror that was chasing me had to end. I jumped, and the instant I got off the ground, hands shot out of the clouds, grabbed me, and I woke up. In that moment, I knew there was a God, and that God was taking care of me. I knew nothing of Jesus Christ, nothing of the Scriptures, but I knew that something bigger than me was at work. What I didn't realize is the impact of that imagery for how I hear Scripture. Because when I come to these passages, I still hear it as if that voice in the cloud, in the dark, with thunder and lightning and terror, is speaking and to be honest, I'm at a point in my life where I don't hear that God anymore. Not because the voice has changed. It's because I've stopped listening. Whenever someone is yelling, whether it's the voice of God in the Scripture that I imagine or anywhere else, I simply tune them out. It's almost like having hearing aids with a control, and I just hit the "off" button. I don't want that energy. I don't want that power. I don't want that anger. I don't want terror. I don't want any of that in my life. And so it just bounces off of me. And I wonder if I'm not the only one who, when reading stuff like this and hearing it delivered in that style, just kind of tunes out and doesn't hear the Good News that's offered to each of us.

And so I imagine this text that was read to a people who had been devastated-- 30 years of exile, who were just coming back to Jerusalem wondering what might be left for them. Their houses have been taken over or destroyed. All of their crops that they had planted were taken over, given to someone else, the proceeds. The Babylonians pretty much destroyed every aspect of the life of the people of Judah. But at some point, the king in Babylon decided to send the people back. Maybe he had had enough or maybe he had had a dream. He sent the people back, and they were destroyed even more. Their temple gone, their houses gone, the work of their hands gone, what were they going to do? And while I can imagine a Charlton Heston standing on a stone somewhere in the middle of Jerusalem with hundreds of people or thousands of people gathered around him, proclaiming with all kinds of energy, "Don't worry. There's going to be a new Heaven, a new Earth. We're going to be glad. We're going to rejoice. We're going to build. We're going to enjoy. And not just us, but our children. No more death. No more destruction. No more craziness. No more chaos." It's hard for me to hear that in today's world.

As I've said before from this pulpit, I still have people that come to me knowing of my health situation who say, "Well, it's just God's plan for you." I'm still here, so I haven't actually strangled anyone [laughter], yet. And I know I'm not alone in that, because I've been with many of you as you faced challenges in this life that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. And what I've come to ask myself this week is, "Does this passage offer anything to those of us who are struggling, who are wondering, who are hurting, who are worried, wounded or facing a transition that we didn't expect?" And so I heard this passage offered as if a friend came over and shared these words, "hey, I know things have been difficult but don't worry, new things are before you. The old things that you worried about, that drove you crazy, that hurt--those things, don't think about those anymore. It's time to be glad, to find joy because new things are happening." And in hearing it in that voice, it's like, "Oh, that's Gospel."

The Prophet Isaiah, speaking to a people who were carted off in exile for 30 to 40 years, coming back to utter desolation, there's Gospel. So much so that I learned on Friday that this passage from Isaiah is an alternative reading for Easter. That's how much good news there is in this passage. In a sense, it pre-imagines the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And what does this passage name for us? Joy, gladness, life, that we have the ability to work and are rewarded for that work, so justice. And to me, the most powerful aspect of the passage is a sentence long. It says, "Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear." The God who anticipates our needs. A God who knows that what we want and what we long for and what we desire is Shalom, peace, wholeness, togetherness. The wolf and the lamb feeding together. The lion and the ox together. One praying for the other together, people who don't hurt anybody else, but who get along and respect each other.

In a sense, I've heard this as a gentle, comforting voice and not as a voice from on High. And in the midst of my studying for this passage, I had an experience that I want to share with you and, I think, captures the essence of this passage. I was actually reading a commentary on it when I got a phone call that said, "Hey, there's somebody here who wants to talk to the pastor, do you really want to meet with them?" I guessed that the person was looking for some money, they needed some help, and I thought, "Okay, yeah, I'll meet with them." So the person came in. He's about a 60-ish-year-old African-American man. He sat down, I introduce myself and I said, "How can I help you?" He told me a little bit about his story and he said, "You know, what I really want is a job." He didn't want a handout. He didn't want, sort of, that easy answer. He wanted to enjoy the fruits of his labor. So I asked him what he had been doing in order to get a job. And he said that he had gone to the library and they were going to teach him how to use a computer so that he could get an email address. And that when he applied for jobs, people might email him back. I said, "How long is that going to take you?" He said, "Oh, they told me it would take a week or two to figure all that out." I said, "Do you mind if I help you now?" He said, "No." I said, "Come here." So we sit together and in a minute I got him a Gmail account, got it all set up, printed out the instructions. And I said, "When you go to the library, have them help you log into your Gmail account. You now have email." I said, "Do you have a resume?" He said, "No." I said, "All right, write down what you've been doing. Come back tomorrow and let's put together a resume and upload it to Indeed.com and see if we can get you a job." He came back the next day. I formatted it as a resume, posted it to Indeed.com and together, we had him apply for seven jobs. The next day I did a funeral. I wasn't here. When I got back, Paula came into my office and said, "You know that gentleman that was here yesterday?" I said, "Yes." "He came back to thank you because not only does he have a job offer, but he's got two more interviews that he thinks might even be better than that."

How easy it would have been to say, "I'm busy." Or "I don't do that." "We don't do that." But you're hearing not only from me but from Jim Cooper today, about the power of just being present with others. And what I've learned from this passage and I hope what you've learned from this sermon, is that being gentle is the way forward. That being gentle might actually bring about Shalom, peace, wholeness, and togetherness. Amen.