

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

Ephesians 1:11-23

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 6:20-31

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

*'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

*'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

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 whatever it is within us. Pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words we've heard from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all of these words and bless and transform them into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let Christ's word dwell within each of us. Let us hear the word addressed to us as we have need. Let it comfort or let it challenge. Let it encourage or let it draw us back. Whatever it is, Lord, may it be your word that I speak. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

So every now and then you have one of those weeks where it feels like you're just on a fair ride. And you're kind of buckled in and you're just going along. And sometimes those weeks can be bumpy and make you a little nauseous and a little nervous. But that's not the case this week. This week I feel like I've been buckled in and the Spirit has been speaking mightily. Been reading a book with the book group called *On the Brink of Everything*. It's a spirituality or a theological consideration of the benefits and wisdom of getting old. It's written by Parker Palmer. In the book, he talks about how important it is for us to consider our lives from the edge, "from the brink" as he says, and to look, imagine ourselves there, and then to look back, and to allow that imagining to shape how we live our lives; to not be so busy or strive so hard for success; to not work too hard and miss out on the important things like dinner with families, or the opportunity to be gathered with friends. In a sense, it's a book, much like today, in the life of the church, on All Saints Sunday, where we allow the lives of those loved ones that have passed in this last year, the opportunity to stop and to reflect and to think, to ask ourselves, "What do we want to leave behind?"

Soon in worship, we'll read names and light candles. So in a sense, the question for us is, "What light do we want to leave to those that are not yet with us in heaven?" These questions or this consideration for many in today's world, is alien and seems kind of strange. Why on earth would I ever consider my death? Everything in our culture seems to move us beyond the moment of death. And while scripture encourages us to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Twitter and Facebook and everything else that speaks to us kind of bypasses or glazes over death as quickly as possible. Why would I want to dwell on that? And to be honest, that's a good question because it hurts to have a loved one taken from us. Whether it's at the ripe old age of 108 or whether it's much too soon, it hurts. and yet as those who trust in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, to consider that loss or our lives from that perspective, is important for us.

So what happened this week is, I was reading the book and then I went to spiritual direction. I have the great honor, as I've said before, of sitting with Belden Lane, who's a retired professor at SLU and a published author. A man whose spiritual discipline is wilderness backpacking while taking along a book or a reading from a saint. And he couples those experiences of backpacking and nature with the wisdom of the saint and that's really the formula for the books that he writes lately. I met with him. I haven't seen him for several months because we don't meet during the summer. And then because of medical reasons, I didn't meet with him in September or October. So, I just met with him this week. He asked how things were going. And I said that things were going okay. I sort of caught him up to speed. And just that morning, I had scheduled for myself an advent retreat to Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico. So I joyfully shared that news with him. I said, "I can't wait to go back there. It's a place that speaks to my soul. It's a place where I'm nourished and encouraged. I love the expansiveness of the landscape, the barrenness, the colors during the days, and the stars at night. Just all of it." And then I said, very excitedly, "And I found a new spot." And he said, "Oh really? What spot is that?" And I said, "Well, you know that road that goes to the monastery?" It's an 18 mile dirt road that goes back to nowhere. And at the very end of it, it's a monastery. I said, "Halfway down that road, there's a place called The Big Eddy Take-out. It's where the river curves and the water swirls."

The only reason it's a spot is because the Department of Natural Resources built an outhouse there. And so there's parking and restroom facilities. But it's also the place where kayakers and rafters take out their boats because they start up by the monastery. And I said, "It's a wonderful place. I discovered it last time I was there. I stopped to use the restroom and then I decided just to walk down by the river. And I found myself spending hours just sitting on a rock watching the water flow by." And he looked at me with a wry smile on his face and he said, "I started my new book talking about The Big Eddy Take-out. You know that book I just finished? The one that I told you about when we met last?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "It just came out over the summer and that's where it starts." I was mortified and elated simultaneously. The book is entitled *The Great Conversation*. Landscape and soul care is what he combines. And in the book, he talks about how important it is to listen. To listen to nature and the whispering of the spirit. Not in people but in things. Whether it be animals or just weather. All that kind of stuff. And as he talked about it, I got more excited and felt a little more dumb for bringing it up. But we just kind of met there and we kept going. Well, as soon as I got home, I ordered the book. Thankfully, because of Amazon, I got it the next day. And I was able to actually get my hands on what he had written. And it's amazing to me because the text that we're looking at today talks about blessing and flow. The ultimate teaching polar opposites, "Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich." All of these opposites are laid out by Jesus, educating his disciples that we better be careful of what we honor and what we think is important. But in the transition from the blessing and woe section, to the love your enemies and do good to others section is one line that is really important. It says, "But I say to you that listen." "But I say to you that listen." That's what we're doing today in a sense. We are listening to the lives of those who have gone before us. We're also listening to the hurts that rise up inside of us. And we're listening to scripture, the

voice of Jesus who says, "I say to you that listen." And thankfully, Belden has encouraged me and others, and I'm sharing it with you to encourage you to listen. Not just to books or people, but to nature for what it might bring. What wisdom it might share and what love you may feel. This is what he wrote, the first words of his introduction, "I've taken the dirt road toward the monastery, turning off before the Big Eddy Take-out. Having left the car under juniper trees overlooking the Chama River. I'm hiking the bluff downstream towards Lake Abiquiu. This is ghost ranch land. Georgia O'Keefe country. The high desert landscape of Northern New Mexico is a sparse terrain bearing the trace of stories long forgotten. It's a good place to study the parlance of wind and flowing water, to ponder ravens on the wing, and the play of shadows among the rocks. The land here cuts through you like a knife, enticing you to relinquish one trusted language for another, or for none at all. I'd like that to happen. Intrigued as I am by what the shamans and mystics call the secret language of nature, I have no illusion of being either a shaman or a mystic, but I've longed all my life to be able to listen as wild things speak. We're surrounded by a world that talks, but we don't listen. We're part of a community engaged in a vast conversation, but we deny our role in it. We haven't the courage to acknowledge our desperate need for what we can't explain. The soul feeds on what takes us to the edge, but we don't go there willingly."

And then, at the last sentences of the introduction, "I shoulder my pack and hit the trail. Realizing I'm being called to a memory deeper than my own, to a language my body has known all along. The desert speaks out of lifetimes of patience and pain with a subtle but insistent voice. My role in the great conversation isn't to fully understand, only to listen and to love." In a sense, he captures the essence of All Saints' Sunday, to listen and to love. The scripture says, "I say to you that listen, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you." In a sense, the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us to be kind to everyone, even those who are unkind to us. While I know this isn't easy work, this is the invitation for us. to listen to the invitation of Christ and to listen on this Sunday to the stories and the memories and the wisdom that comes from the saints who have gone before us. I found it intriguing or fascinating and a little bit scary that on this week, coming to a text that says listen, I have an encounter with a spiritual director whose presence was all about encouraging me to listen.

I just want to share a few more things of what I've heard this week thinking about this day. I thought about Stan Croissant. I've thought about Peg Atkins who was on the PNC that called me to this congregation. I thought about Dodie Frank and Tom Roberts and Mary Kay Menees. I've thought about the others as well, but these stick out for me. I thought, "What do I want to have remembered about my life as my loved ones are sitting here ready to come forward and light a candle?" I think about Stan and his unflinching comfort in who he was, his brilliance and his quiet demeanor in life, his willingness to serve on mission trips and to promote the cause of mission within the congregation. And I appreciate the yin of Stan to the yang of Sharon. They were a couple that together were more beautiful, if you will, than an individual. I'd like to leave that behind, an idea that somehow I was able to promote good causes, that I was a good spouse, that I was a good person.

I think about Anne O'Connell and her openness to the question. She never stopped being curious. Always a student, always reading, always wise. I'd like to have those qualities as well. I think about Dodie Frank and her ability to hold things together, whether it's people or events or business, she had an amazing ability to be the hub and the glue for so much that was going on, not in her life but the lives around her. I have none of that. But that would be nice to have, to be the center of something beyond yourself where your gifts are shared for the benefit of others. I think about Tom Roberts and his commitment and care of this congregation, this building, the parking lot. God bless him. He loved this church with every fiber of his being. I want that as well. I want to love and care for the community the way he did with his commitment and his passion. Mary Kay Menees, I saw just a strong woman, sure of who she was, present, available, participating in those activities. She gave herself to what gave her life and she said no to things that didn't. Lovely qualities to have.

And then I remember Peg Atkins who came to me early on in my ministry, looked me square in the eye and said, "David, we got to do better. We've got to be a better congregation when it comes to welcoming homosexuals. We got to be better at caring for people who are different than us. We need to be better at welcoming everyone and caring for them." And I just said, "Whoa, Peg. Whoa." She was a strong and determined woman. But she was right, this church and every church needs to do better at welcoming whoever comes through the doors. So in these stories of people, these remembrances, these flickers of a candlelight, if you will, we have an invitation. Will we listen to their lives? Will we share their stories so that others can hear? And more importantly, will we listen and love, as Belden says in his book, or as Jesus says in the gospel. I say to you that listen, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Not easy. But if we listen, we can all be faithful together. Amen.