

“Practice Before Preaching”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 5, 2017

All Saints Sunday

Readings from Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 and Matthew 22:1-12

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

Matthew 22:1-12

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless.

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 will take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words we offer 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 day to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And let that word do its work in our hearts, and our minds, and our souls. Let it comfort us where we hurt, let it encourage us where we fall short, let it challenge us when we need to serve but most importantly, God, let it be the word that feeds our spirit so that we might be your people now and forever. Amen.

Last Sunday was Reformation Sunday and I preached a little bit on the tradition namely by picking and lifting up the slogan of reformation which is that we are reformed and always reforming. As

Presbyterians, we are a people who have a tradition but we're also a people who are open to changing our practices and our beliefs because of the grace of God that's at work among us and within us. Last week we preached about it but today we get to practice reformed and always reforming. You see each year we do our saint's day and we have candles and we invite people to come forward on this sacred day and light a candle for someone that they love who have passed away.

Last year, after the service was over, as I walked down the aisle and went out the sanctuary door, I encountered a dear friend in the congregation, Mr. Dan Geeting. He was sitting out there, obviously a little upset so I went over and he looked up and he quite simply said, "You didn't mention David", his son who had passed away in the prior year. The voice inside my head said, and thank God it was just in my head and not out my mouth, "Yeah, but David is not a member." But by the interaction that he and I had, I could tell that a practice of this congregation meant to honor those who had passed away and lift them up for all of us, caused harm to someone and that seemed fundamentally wrong. Before Karen and I even made it upstairs we began talking about what had happened and how horrible both of us felt. Why did we do it this way? On Monday we included Bill in the conversation and really began to question, "What is the purpose of this? And how might we do it differently?" And we realized that one of the practices that the church had held dear forever needed to be transformed, it needed to reform itself so that we could light candles for all the people that the congregation loved who have been lost through the year. We're going to see names that have asterisks by them because they are members, but we're also going to see names of people who are important in the life of people within our congregation who were not members. In a sense, because of that experience a year ago, we've decided to widen the circle of grace and our understanding of what it means to be a saint.

To be honest, as I walked up into the office after that encounter a year ago, I felt humiliated. I felt like we had failed as a church. And I realized that something needed to change. In today's passage, we have that famous line that all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. I wondered after last year's experience and reflecting on the passage, what does it mean for us to cultivate humility in order that all people might be exalted? Not just ourselves, but others that we care for and love. What would it mean for each of us to cultivate humility? And can we, as individuals or a congregation, endeavor to cultivate humility, or is it just something that we learn because of failures in our lives? I found the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California in Berkeley actually teaches humility. They also teach self-compassion and gratitude and many other wonderful things. But one of the articles that I read specifically talked about how people can cultivate humility. How we can get ourselves out of the center and allow other people and their needs and concerns to be centered in our lives. The first thing they talk about is that we need to embrace our humanness. We need to embrace the fact that we all make mistakes, that we all face challenges, and in an essence, that we all pass away. We are finite. We don't have all the answers. We try our best, but sometimes we make a mistake. The simple phrase that I came up with for this first practice of cultivating humility is simply, "I'm sorry."

I pray and hope that it's what I said a year ago, "I'm sorry." The second practice that they talk about for cultivating humility is that we embrace mindfulness and self-compassion. Mindfulness and self-compassion are all the rage these days. They're teaching it in schools, in high schools, in colleges, and in workplaces, how might we be more present to what's happening, and how might we be kinder to ourselves? The conversations - and I don't know what happens inside of you - but the conversations that I have with the committees that live in my head after I do something where I cause harm unintentionally is pretty brutal. "David, you idiot. Why didn't you think of this ahead of time? Why did you inflict so much pain? What are you doing? You're not very good at any of this. Why are you even a pastor? You shouldn't be a pastor. You should go pump gas somewhere" On and on the conversation

unfolds. Right? You know that voice. And the second piece of how we practice mindfulness and self-compassion is just simply we tell those voices to be quiet, and then we say, "I'm okay." I'm okay. In a sense, it's what's etched in the windows before you that you are safe by grace. I'm okay.

The last practice that they mentioned for cultivating humility is that we express gratitude. Again, a simple phrase captures it. "Thank you." I read the story of a young mother who had given birth to a child prematurely. The child spent 15 days in the NICU. The parents were not able to touch or hold their child during that entire time. After about a week of being at the hospital, the staff finally convinced this young mother and her husband to go home and sleep in their own beds and rest and take care of themselves. The mother said that as she left the hospital, she was filled with fear and guilt and was afraid and didn't know what was going to happen to her baby. All of these negative feelings just kind of welled up inside of her. And then she talked about how, for the first time in weeks, she had gotten on her knees beside her bed before she crawled in for the night. She said that as her knees touched the floor, it was nothing but gratitude that welled up inside of her. Gratitude for the gift of life, even though, in her precious daughter, it seemed compromised. Gratitude for her family that was supporting her, standing right beside her during this ordeal. Gratitude for the hospital, the doctors, the nurses, the staff. Gratitude. She said she was stunned and surprised by that, but that that sense of gratitude that welled up inside of her changed all those other things. In a sense, it washed them away where she could be present to what was going on. In that prayer, she uttered those simple words, "Thank you."

How might we cultivate humility? "I'm sorry." "I'm okay." "Thank you." And when we cultivate humility, our passage says that we are exalted. But what I honestly think is that when we cultivate humility, we're able to exalt others. And to be honest, I wish that the bible said that. I ran across the story of a St. Louis person named Jane Bury. She was a public school social worker who spent her entire career serving kids in the inner-city schools of St. Louis. Imagine the overwhelming amount of money she made, right? Not very much. She always clipped coupons when she went to the grocery store. She drove a 1970 avocado green Chevy for 36 years, repainted it twice avocado green [laughter]. She went to the thrift shop to buy her clothes. She wore fake jewelry. And she'd go to Arby's when they had the 5 for \$5 special, and she'd eat one sandwich and freeze four of them so she'd have an entire week's worth of lunches for only \$5. One of the things that she did do was she attended her church every week and she volunteered at a nursing home every Friday evening. When she was died, those that knew her were stunned because she gave family members, her church, the nursing home, and many organizations that she cared about part of \$1.4 million. This woman saved almost everything she had and gave it to others. Those who humble themselves will exalt others. Nelson Mandela said, "The first thing that we need to do is to be honest with ourselves. You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself. Great peacemakers are all people of integrity, of honesty, and humility." I'm grateful that there's a way that each of us can cultivate that humility that Mandela addresses - "I'm sorry." "I'm okay." "Thank you." Amen.