

“Wholeness Be Yours”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 15, 2018

I John 3:1-17

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Luke 24:36-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

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 your spirit will be at work among us. That it would take whatever thoughts we have, whatever worries, concerns, or joys. That it would take the words we offer in song and in prayer. That it would take the words we've heard from the Gospel and the epistle. That it would take even the words that you lay upon my heart this morning to share. It would take all these words and transform them into the Word of Jesus Christ. A word that gives life. A word that nurtures faith. A word that provides comfort. And a word that challenges us and invites us to serve our neighbors in need, both here and far away. So let that Word do its work in each of our hearts so that all we do and all we say will somehow bring forth your glory on Earth. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

So last week I was on retreat in Tuscon, Arizona while Karen was lounging here doing nothing. Except planning 2 memorial services, 30 hospital visitations, some administrative tasks that popped up, and just a few other minor things that she had to take care of [laughter]. We'll talk [laughter]. Yes, we will [laughter]. You already know that I'm full of it, right? Okay. So we're good. No, but I went to the desert to breathe and to be on retreat, and to just sit with all that has sort of happened since the first of the year, and then with Easter moving so quickly and a great celebration. It's always just a great time to get away, and to breathe, and to think, and to reorient. And I love the desert. For some reason, it speaks to my soul. To be in a place where there are cacti, and they were all in bloom. And there's lots of heat. Lots of heat. 104 degrees heat. It feels wonderful. I can hear the Spirits speak differently when I'm there. As an introvert, I love to go away on retreat by myself. And the place that I went to was out of town in a ravine. And it had a dining hall that had a patio. And the patio looked straight out on all of Tuscon with the mountains behind it. It was gorgeous.

And one day, I got my lunch and I sat out on the patio because it was hot. And I put on my sunglasses, and I had my baseball cap on. And I put up my shields that said, "Do not disturb." And I was eating slowly as a gentleman walked in front of me and sat not in the table next to me, but even one further away. And he sat facing the same way I did and he was in front of me. And I thought, "Good. He read the signs." And just as I thought that and put the next bite in my mouth, he turned to me and said, "Hey, how are you?" I said, "I'm fine. How are you?" Wrong question [laughter]. I heard about him being halfway through a 10-week stint at the retreat house. He was in the midst of a six-month Sabbatical because every seven years Catholic priests get six months off to take a Sabbatical. He had been in ministry almost 40 years and had never taken a Sabbatical. This was his first one. He loved it. He was learning tons of things. Did you know that there's a desert museum about two miles down the road? If you've got time, you should go and visit. It's amazing if you love the desert, and on, and on, and on, the conversation went.

And then you know how every now and then you have these conversations, you're a complete stranger, and you're sort of playing conversational badminton? You're just, "Here it comes." "How are you?" "I'm fine." "How are you?" and then, "I'm good," and back. So we played that game all through lunch and it started up here with, "How are you? What's your name? Where are you from?" "Chicago," "St. Louis," and it got all the way where I thought, "Okay, how do I draw this to an end?" So I said, "What's the worst thing you've ever had to deal with in ministry?" That was the wrong question [laughter] because he told me and it was horrible. He said not too long before he went on Sabbatical he had to minister to an entire family and, in fact, really, the whole congregation because of a mom who decided to go home one afternoon and take a nap and never wake up, and she had succeeded. He talked about dealing with the kids, the dad, her husband, the in-laws, her parents. I mean, he said, "It's like it just shook everybody," and as a Catholic priest he preaches every day at mass, so he said it was weeks of trying to process through, "What do you do with this?"

And as we talked about that, and of course, he asked sort of, "What's the worst thing that you've ever had to deal with?" which I'll get to in a second, but as he was talking about that and talking about needing to speak about it every day and processing through it, something about that just kind of stuck with me. And I wasn't really sure what. I just remember thinking, "Oh, yeah. That over and over and over kind of thing." Because what I realize is while I was there and also was looking at this passage because I knew I had to come back and preach, was that the passage fits the model that is throughout the New Testament again, and again, and again, and again, and again. The angelic messenger or presence comes and says, "Peace be with you," and the people are startled, terrified, and afraid. Every time there's fear and terror when God's goodness shows up in people's lives, and as I was thinking about that pattern and listening to him share his story about processing this every week in his homilies and trying to make sense of it, I realized, and I sort of know this, but it comes back again and again.

We all want life to be a straight line. We want to learn our lessons and then know them and live forever in bliss and happiness and peacefulness. And life just doesn't work that way. Things happen good things, bad things, hard things, easy. There's no straight line. Peace be with you. And they were terrified. So when he asked me what's the hardest thing that you've had to deal with, I kind of hedged a bit. And I told him about the work I did with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and I said, really, it's doing things like when I came to Tucson years ago after the shooting in the Safeway parking lot and having to be with a church that's mourning the loss of a loved one and also trying to understand why other members of their congregation were shot after shopping in a parking lot. So he asked a few questions about that, and I mentioned that Kirkwood has been through a similar situation. So we talked about that. And

then the conversation just kind of drew to a close.

One of the hobbies that I have while I'm on these little retreats or mini-sabbaticals is that I love to find the greasiest, hole-in-the-wall place to eat that has the best food in town. I have a gift from God to find these places. I don't know why [laughter]. So I go on Yelp and Google, and I'm looking at this and that and the other, and I find a place that's rated the number three taco place in Tucson. It's in South Tucson I thought, and it's called Taqueria El Pueblito or some-- I don't know Spanish, but Siri knows how to get there. So I punch in the coordinates. It opens at 10:30. It's 10:00. This is the next day after talking to the guy. I'm going for brunch because I missed breakfast but I thought this will be perfect. And I get in the car. And I'm driving, and Siri's going, "Turn left. Turn right." And all of a sudden I come to a red light, and I look to my right. And there is the parking lot of Northminster Presbyterian Church where I had been deployed so many years before. The parking lot where I stood and talked to the couple, the gentleman who had been shot in his elbow because he was laying over his wife to protect her.

And I thought about all the things that had transpired between the first time I had been to Tucson and this time. And I was realizing that somehow the potter in Jeremiah's story where God says, "Go down to the potter's house and watch the potter." And the potter's working the clay and trying to make a vessel. And it's spoiled. And then he reworks the clay and turns it into a good vessel. That's what he wants. And God says, "This is what I can do to your people. I can take that which is broken or misshapen, and I can continue to rework it until there is goodness in it." I was thinking this is what is happening right now. And then I heard a horn honk because apparently, you can't sit there for four minutes thinking about all this stuff when the light turns green [laughter]. And I couldn't shake it from then on. The image of two hands working that clay. In fact, I went out into the backyard of the little hermitage I had, and I scooped up some dirt and I took it in and filled a little pot that I had found with some water and turned it into mud, and I just played with it for a while.

The good news of Easter is that somehow by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, our deaths, our brokenness, our being nailed to a situation that we cannot get away from, all of that is reworked into goodness. And on this trip, I realized that sometimes it takes eight years to realize that. Eight years of God at work in your life. You don't even know it. But heartache, and anxiety, and worry, and feeling of inadequacy are being reworked into goodness for others. I believe that this is what Jesus is trying to get the disciples and us always to remember. God knows our feelings of inadequacy. God knows our struggles. God knows our sins, our failures, our mistakes, our worries, our fears. All the reasons that we never want to get involved, God knows them all and still says to each of us, "Peace be with you," because it is God's hope that each of us will take that peace that finds us when we have the courage to share it with someone who needs it. Amen