

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“An Ethic of Grace”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, April 19, 2020

Psalm 16

A Miktam of David.

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord;

I have no good apart from you.’

*As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.*

*Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.*

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.*

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.*

*I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.*

*I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*

*Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.*

*For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*

You show me the path of life.

*In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.*

I Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Let us pray. May your spirit move among us, O God. May these words that we speak, these words from your Holy Word, may they come alive within us. May they be endowed by your spirit so that we might become more faithful followers of your way and of your truth and of your life. We pray all of this in the name of the Christ. Amen.

Blessed be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. By God's great mercy, the Holy one has given us a new birth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In this, we rejoice even if now we have had to suffer trials so that the genuineness of our faith is tested by fire and may be found to result in praise and glory and honor. These are words from the 1st century AD, from this first letter of Peter from which we read.

From the 1st century AD-- but I dare say these words could be written to us now in our time. Are we not suffering various trials? I suppose in a sense being tested by fire. Especially those of us, those among us who have had to endure the illness of the Coronavirus and most especially those in our world who have lost loved ones so many. Or those who have suddenly become unemployed. Or those whose small business is about ready to go under. So many are suffering various trials. And yet, even as we are in the midst of this season of Easter, this season of resurrection and new life, this season of joy, this season of new birth has broken in on us. Christ is risen we say. Christ is risen indeed. But it seems like we are still in the season of Lent. It feels much more like fat than the season of Easter. And yet, I don't know about you, but oddly enough, oddly enough, this proclamation, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Oddly enough, it seems to stir hope within me, perhaps hope within us. Signs of new birth beginning to sprout up within us, within our communities and our nation, signs of new life. And I sense a state of rejoicing beginning, perhaps bringing forth praise and honor and glory as our lesson for the day states. But I am thinking this only happens paradoxically if we have walked somehow through holy week. Only as we have sat at table with our Lord as he spoke these words about his broken body and his shed blood, only, I think, if we have somehow walked this path to Calvary and seeing the horror of crucifixion and then sat in silence, in utter silence, on that Saturday because it seems to me like it is only then that we know, that whatever our various trials are, whatever we might be suffering, that only then are we assured that the Christ is walking with us, that the Christ is walking alongside of us, is suffering with us. Only then are we assured that there is indeed nothing, as the epistle to the Romans states, that there is nothing that can separate us from that love and compassion, from that deep empathy of God and Christ, that nothing can separate us from the divine that is the source of all things.

As I reflected this last week on the meaning of the resurrection for us in this year, this image came to me. I'm not completely sure what to make of it. But it was an image-- it was an image of an exploding galaxy, kind of like the big bang, an image of light and colors of every kind and particles being pushed out into space and into our world, floating, as it were, out of the sky and landing everywhere on every living thing on the face of the earth. These particles perhaps symbolizing the unleashing in the resurrection of love and of compassion and of grace. And the end of that being accompanied with a sense of wonder and a blessing and of life. Christ is risen. Love and compassion have been unleashed into this world, giving us new life. The Christ could not be contained by death or by despair or by all of the evil intent that was thrown at him but finally, finally, in the end, what survives and lives is the love and the life of God. And Jesus who walks with us in the depths of our suffering bestows in the midst of it all, his spirit upon us, so that we might carry forth his example, his teaching, his deep compassion and his love, so that we might be filled with new life and filled with a new kind of ethic that can transform our communities and our life together, transform our nation and our world. An ethic of grace.

Actually, that phrase came from a new book that I recently read, by Nicholas Kristof. He's a columnist for the New York Times. And he, along with his wife, Sheryl Wubunn, wrote this book entitled *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope*. It was written before the pandemic. It seems to be rather timely, I would say. In the book, they talk in that, most especially, what has happened in a small town in Oregon in which Kristof grew up. How the friends, good friends that he had in high school, good friends that he stayed in touch with all these years. good friends that he rode the bus with every day to school, how over the last 40 years since they graduated from high school, so many of them have fallen into unemployment and drug addiction and depression. And most of them have already died. And the sad part is this plight, in this rural community, Yamhill, Oregon, is not unusual, unfortunately. Kristof somehow escaped all of this. Somehow he left that small town. He lives on the east coast. He has productive work. Has a good marriage and family. Nonetheless, has kept close touch with them. And in the process of documenting what has happened there, he and his wife also highlight examples from other parts of the country and other groups within the country. And one of these examples is about a man named Ian Manuel, who as a young teen at the age of 13 in Tampa, Florida, in attempting to rob a random woman on the streets of Tampa, impulsively pulled out a gun. How he got it, I don't know. But he pulled out a gun, 13 years old, and shot her in the face. The bullet tore apart her jaw and exited her cheek. The police, in investigating this, had no idea who had done it.

But several days later, they pulled several teenagers out of what they determined or what they thought was a stolen car, and in the backseat of that car was Ian Manuel. They took him down to the police station for questioning. And in the course of all of that, for some unknown and odd reason, Ian Manuel spoke up to the police officer and he said, "That woman who was shot in the face several days ago-- I did that." I don't know if it was some kind of odd bragging, and he still isn't sure why he confessed to that crime on the spot, but he admitted to it. But of course he was arrested and indicted. And the case itself inflamed the public in Tampa, Florida. I suppose mostly because Debbie Baigrie, the victim, was a pretty white woman who was a mom, attracted a lot of sympathy, of course. And Ian, who was a black kid, had grown up in the projects. It was made known that he'd been arrested 17 times already. A bad kid. Ian was tried as an adult at 13 and sentenced to prison for life without parole, of course, at an adult prison where he was bullied and abused in all kinds of ways. And he began to lash out in all kinds of other ways, finding himself numerous times in solitary confinement. He was tear-gassed at one point, shot with psychotropic drugs at another, and tried to commit suicide, but Debbie Baigrie had her own struggles and trials as you might imagine. She had, after all, been the victim of this senseless shooting, taking half of her face. And as a result, she had countless surgeries. Countless surgeries on her face that were painful, to say the least. She would be unable to eat for long periods of time. And in those moments of pain and depression, she would be livid at Ian Manuel and unforgiving, feeling like he got what he deserved and that justice had been done. All of which, I think, we can understand.

Somehow, after a time in prison, Ian Manuel began to mature and get a better hold of himself. He began to take advantage of classes that were offered at the prison. Began to study, began to work toward some kind of degree. And he began to, most crucially, reflect on just what it was that he had done. He was allowed one phone call a month. And so on Christmas eve in 1992, he picked up the phone and he asked the operator to make a collect call to Debbie Baigrie in Tampa, Florida. When Debbie answered, the operator asked if she would accept the charges from an Ian Manuel. And of course, everything in her was saying, "Absolutely no way." But out of morbid curiosity, she did accept the charges. Ian, saying that he was terribly sorry for what had happened, said that he just wanted to call and wish her a Merry Christmas. Debbie, dumbfounded, replied with a question that had plagued her for years and asked him, "Why? Why did you shoot me?" "I didn't know what I was doing," he said heavily. Long pause, "It was a terrible mistake. And it happened so quickly. I'm so sorry."

I don't know what happens sometimes within us. Perhaps the spirit of God hovers over us and somehow whispers in our ear of love of neighbor and love, even, of enemy. The resurrected Christ breathing to us, forgive 70 times 7. But in that moment, Debbie Baigrie, a woman who had undergone many painful surgeries as a result of this senseless accident and very difficult times, said that she suddenly had an awareness, that in some ways, while she had survived the incident and have lived and had a life, Ian's life had, in many ways, been taken from him. And she said she had an understanding suddenly of just what it was that he had grown up with. And she forgave him. And she ended up saying this, "He woke me up. He woke me up. My life became so much enriched by forgiving him." Think about that, "My life became much more enriched by forgiving him." The wisdom of Jesus, surely an ethic of grace.

Amazingly, she ended up becoming his friend and his advocate. And later his case was picked up by Brian Stevenson of the equal justice initiative, a man who wrote a book worth reading called, *Just Mercy*. And he successfully arranged for a new hearing on his case, new parole hearing. And Debbie Baigrie testified on his behalf at that hearing. And on the day that he was released--he was released--and on that day, he celebrated with Debbie. There's a picture of them together in that book, eating a pizza dinner together. And he's now living in New York and working in a program with at-risk kids. Debbie remains his friend, perhaps the results of an ethic of grace.

Our trials undoubtedly, hopefully, are not nearly as dramatic as Ian and Debbie's. Our lives, hopefully, are not so filled with tragedy and struggle. But nonetheless, none of us escape having trials and struggle. And nonetheless, as followers of Jesus, the resurrected one, we have a sacred calling to believe, to have faith, that because death was overcome on Calvary, because Christ is risen, love and compassion, indeed, just like those particles exploding out of the galaxy, love and compassion and justice have been unleashed into this world. And as followers of Jesus, we strive to exercise, then, this ethic of grace and forgiveness and love. So indeed, as our scripture lesson for the day in 1 Peter states, "Blessed be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, for by God's great mercy, we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen."