

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
“The Crack in the Middle
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 20, 2021

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

Moses said to the LORD, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.” Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.’ He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’

Matthew 18:1-5

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

There is great pressure in our current social and political climate, even within our faith communities, to see the world from a single perspective, to see the world in only one color, only black or only white and nothing else, nothing in between. A stroll through the channels of cable news, or through our Facebook feeds, or our Twitter accounts, or whatever the sources from which we receive information, such a stroll often paints a grim and lopsided picture of the world we inhabit.

On many days, I feel like we are characters in Dr. Seuss's satirical take on the Cold War, the Butter Battle Book. If it's not a book you know, I encourage you to get it and read it for your enjoyment. Read it to children. It's really special for that. In the Butter Battle Book, there are Yooks and there are Zooks, and these Yooks and Zooks are the bitterest of enemies, even though in appearance and character and shared land mass, these two peoples are exactly the same. The only substantive difference between these warring nations is that the Yooks eat their bread with the butter side up, while the Zooks eat their bread with the butter side down. The Yook ideology claims that the Zooks are completely evil and eat their bread improperly because they have kinks in their souls, meaning that they are not quite right, that they are a lesser creature. And so it is okay, It is justified to hate them, and to not value them, and to not care about their destruction.

Sadly, this Seussian language, from some 40-odd years ago when the book was published, sounds like it's being lifted straight from today's headlines, doesn't it? And even more distressing, all the vitriol about hating and not

valuing and not caring for others, about others having kinks in their souls, all this language is alive and well and living in our midst. and spreading its poison within our midst. Many of the issues that are dividing us as a nation today, that are dividing us even within the body of Christianity today, many of these issues are as pointless as eating bread with a different side buttered. And we're spending so much emotional energy and verbal vitriol on these lesser issues, that when it comes to issues and priorities of substance, matters that are vital to our mutual well-being and to our critical connections to the rest of the world community, matters like truth telling, and valuing differences, and believing that God gives us intellect and imagination to use for the good of all, there is so much that would try and separate us over the little meaningless stuff that when we get to these bigger things, we've already exhausted ourselves or grown numb to the verbal, and physical, and emotional, and spiritual assaults on us as individuals, on us collectively. And in this state of intellectual and emotional exhaustion becomes all too easy for us to fall into this same trap, all too easy for us to label those with different ideas and different points of view-- to call them our enemy with kinks in their souls, to see them as people who must not be trusted, people who should really just be destroyed.

We cannot forget that as disciples of Jesus, as children of God, as those who have been created to be wise and live in God's creation differently, faithfully, connected to others, we can never forget that we are people who must see and must embrace shades of gray. And we cannot forget that we must be people who use words that describe and celebrate greatness rather than people who can only utter inflammatory words that are all black, that are all white, that have no room within them for the grayness of grace.

In her book, *Becoming Wise*, Krista Tippett, host of the NPR show *On Being*, lifts up the ideas of scholar and activist Catholic layperson Frances Kissling, who says this quote, "There is a crack in the middle of our culture where people on both sides absolutely refuse to see the other as evil." Kissling proclaims that this crack is where she wants to live and what she wants to work through her life to make wider. "Trying to exist in the greatness that is the crack in the middle," says Kissling, "invites us to stay connected to those on either side of the divide by refusing to understand them as evil. As those who are made in the image of a creative and imaginative God, we can and should have different ideas, different opinions, different beliefs, but all our differences should be based on the goodness that God declares and infuses into every aspect of creation, every human being, every one of us. It is never our place to declare another person or group of people-- to declare them evil, to refuse to seek connections with them because they perceive and describe the world differently, even, and especially, it is never our place to put them down or call them evil when they seem to us to be vile, to be repulsive, to be unwilling to bear the goodness with which God has gifted them.

Our Ecclesiastes lesson is advice on rite worship at one level and, on a deeper level, it is, I think, a cautionary tale about letting rash and empty words escape one's mouth or one's heart in the telling of meaningless stories. Fools are the ones who don't know how to keep quiet, for Ecclesiastes, who don't know how to be humble before God. And in a day and age when technology affords us so many ways of offering our words, our ideas, and opinions to the world, it is easy, I think-- too easy to forsake wisdom and fall into the trap of playing the fool. If we are to dwell in the crack in the middle and be peacemakers, and wise ones, and those who embody the goodness of God, then our words must be purposeful and intentional. Our words must be sparse and our listening abundant. William Sloane Coffin, the former chaplain at Yale University and the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City-- Coffin was fond of saying that if people want justice to roll down like water, as described by the prophet Amos-- if people want justice to roll down like water, then they-- then we must spend our time, and energy, and resources making sure that the irrigation system is working. We must make sure that all people have access to the clean, life-giving, overwhelming abundant waters of God's grace. We can't expect and we can't wait for others to do this on our behalf. We have to be the ones who keep the system in repair, who keep the irrigation system functioning. Our words are empty and our words fail to expand the crack in the middle unless we back up what we say with the ache of our hearts, with the action of our hands, with the sweat of our brow.

In our Matthew lesson, a child who has not yet learned the guile, and judgment, and lying that infects so many of us as we grow into adulthood, is lifted up by Jesus as having the ability to dwell in the crack in the middle and all of us who want to live differently who are seeking the presence of God's kingdom, God's beloved community here

in our midst for all people everywhere, all of us who desire to practice and to speak the wisdom which God has woven into the fiber of our being. We are invited-- more than that we are implored by Jesus, to take note of the example of a child, allowing our words to be few and our humility to be vast, and our welcome to be extravagant. No, I don't want to pretend for a moment that any of what I'm talking about today is easy or simple in trying to be inhabitation in the crack in the middle. It's just not easily done. It's impossibly difficult to try and be a voice for reason and peace when so many of the folks around us are so angry and are busy acting like bullies and are proud of not using their minds and of not having compassion and of refusing to listen to any voice that does not agree with their own.

It is downright frustrating to embrace and share the grace of greatness in the face of this kind of opposition. And it is deceptively easy to run out of energy and patience in the face of such overwhelming and continual resistance to connect to another. It becomes tempting, I think, for us to respond in kind behavior, with like behavior, to start acting out with the same cruelty and inflexibility and selfishness that we are just being bombarded with.

But these lesser choices are not afforded to us as disciples of Jesus, for Jesus turns the other cheek, Jesus walks the second mile, Jesus gives the cloak off his back and the shirt as well. And he expects this same kind of self-giving from we who proclaim him as Lord and Savior, from we who identify ourselves as disciples.

For our spiritual homework in the days ahead, I invite us to continue to pay attention to our words. Do the words we use, whatever the situation, do the words we use reflect the purposes and the priorities of God? Do the words we use reflect the goodness in which God creates us, the goodness with which God sees us, the goodness we are to embrace in each other and all others? Do the words we use make us fools like Yooks and Zooks, or do the words we use widen the crack in the middle where the grace of greatness is embraced, where the refusal to label one another as evil is absolute, and where living is deeply interconnected to all people and to the world of which we are a part?

Being wisely faithful is tough work. It is not as we know. It is not for the faint of heart. It is not for those who dwell in the certitude of their rightness. Yet being wisely faithful is possible for us because God has placed goodness deep within us. It is there as a resource for us to use. And being wisely faithful is possible for us because we are disciples of the one who forever is loving us toward our best selves. May it be so for each and every one of us, for all of us together today and tomorrow and forever. Amen.