

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“One In Christ”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-22

Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

He said to his disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.’

Colossians 3:1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

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 Your Spirit would take all that we have within us: our thoughts, our worries, our joys, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words we've heard read from Scripture, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into Your Word, the Word of Christ. And let that Word of Christ live and grow and bear fruit within us so that we might deepen our relationship with You, and we might strengthen our love and service for neighbor. We ask all of this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As Paul confesses, he was a zealot, persecuting those who believed in Jesus Christ. And after his amazing transformation, he became a zealot in promoting the Good News of Jesus Christ. And in this reading from Colossians, we have Paul's zealotry on display: his passion, his commitment, his unwavering determination to encourage everyone who he's shared the Gospel with to hang on desperately to that Good News that he offered. And so in this passage, he uses the imagery and the conversation around baptism as a way to encourage all of those who had come to know Jesus Christ and His saving power. He says through your baptism, you have died to your old way of life, so put to death all those things: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed. Get rid of all of that. And instead, rise up to a new way of life where you're peaceful, and you work for justice, and you serve the needs of those who need your help. And most importantly, that you realize that we're all one in this. Christ is all and in all. No longer slave or free, Greek or Jew, circumcised or not, "All of us are one," He says to the church in Corinth.

And I was thinking about this powerful imagery of baptism, of dying, and putting to death those things in us that don't matter as I got to my study early this morning and opened up my computer and perused the news. 20 killed in El Paso, Texas. 9 killed in Dayton, Ohio. 200 mass shootings have occurred in our country this year alone. These are just the latest to grab the headlines. And I trust, unfortunately, there will be more to come. And so I was thinking about the imagery and the language that we as Christians use to describe our personal journey, putting to death those things that are hurtful or harmful to others, to ourselves,

and to our ideal of being the embodiment of the Gospel, and instead, rising up in a new way of life. And while this language makes sense to us because we understand that it's figural, it's talking about something that is concrete only in the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for many it's literal. So therefore, there's justification to put things to death, not just in their lives that are their own life, but sometimes in the lives of others. And so I want to offer instead this imagery of baptism that Paul also hints at of disrobing from our old way of life and putting on as a pair of clothes you might put on, a new sense of who you are. And it says that you have stripped off the old self with these practices and have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of it's creator.

My hope is that this sermon captures or offers a little bit of knowledge that we can use to reflect on our own journey, the language that we use, and that we would be careful in how we use that language in front of others. It is the gospel. It's written in the Bible that Jesus died for our sins, and that Paul repeatedly says we need to put our old self, our old way of life to death in order to rise to this new way of being. But again, every now and then, we need to stop and be careful. I was so overwhelmed by the stories and thinking about all that's happening in those two communities and the hundreds of other communities. Whenever something like this happens, I begin searching for some good news in the news of our day, and wondering, "What might it be for us?", instead of being hooked by the news headlines, to find ways to access other things that are good and charitable and beneficial for our own faith, and for our lives, and especially for the lives of others. And I shared with the children, one of those things were the fact that this here, the national spelling bee decided after several rounds and seeing no weakness in any of the spellers, to do the unthinkable and basically say that all the eight finalists who were still actively involved were co-champions. The winners of the spelling bee in 2019 are Rashik Gundhasi, Sohoun Sukatankar, Erin Howard, Rabajay Codali, Sekeht Sundar, Christopher Surow, Trufika Pahdi, and Rohan Raja. Each of those eight students won the \$50,000 grand prize, and each of them shared with the others. In fact, they came up with the phrase "Octo-champs". As they would, right? I also learned that in spite of the fact that there's poverty in our country and that so many people struggle to find food that is nutritious, in the US, 20.2 million students receive a free lunch everyday that their school, 20.2 million, which calculates to 3.3 billion free lunches a year in the United States. While there's a ton of work to do on poverty and justice issues to hopefully empower those families to be able to afford lunches on their own, we as a country have not lost our way or our heart in understanding how important it is to feed students in need.

A few days before the spelling bee decision to have eight champions instead of one, Chicago's mayor was sworn into office. Lori Lightfoot became the first black female, openly gay mayor of Chicago. Again, those things that used to stand in the way of someone serving their neighbors even in elected office are no longer barriers. And then, surprisingly, or some maybe even by the work of the spirit, this came to me. I subscribed to Richard Rohr's email insights is what I would call them, and the one for today was a quote on the power of mysticism or a reflection on the power of mysticism and he quotes from a book by an author that I absolutely love. Her name is Doctor Beatrice Bruteau., And the book that I fell in love with years ago is called *The Grand Option: Personal Transformation and a New Creation*. In it, she talks about this global dynamic of what it means to be transformed in the image of God, The Creator and of Christ, and how important it is for all of us to do our work in order to be a better person. The quote is from the preface of a different book, but here's what she wrote in that preface and I think it fits beautifully with the tension, if you will, of the day. "A better world is one in which we recognize that all people possess an incomparable value that we are morally obliged to respect in social, political, and economic terms. Honoring the humanity of your fellow beings means that if they are hungry, ill, or oppressed, you must exert yourself to help them" But this runs up against our inherited instincts of self-protection, greediness, and the desire to dominate others. If we could rearrange energy, our energy from within, if we more often nurtured our companions and promoted their well-being, we ourselves would suffer much less. Rearranging energy from within is what mysticism does, or I would say what deep faith does. How does deep faith do this? Consider that domination, greed, cruelty, violence, and all other ills arise from a sense of insufficient and insecure being. I need more power, more possessions, more respect, admiration, but it's never enough. It comes from every side, from other people, from economic circumstances, from ideas, customs, belief systems, from the natural environment, from our own bodies and minds. All these others intimidate us, threaten us, and make us anxious. We can't control them. They are, to varying degrees, aliens from us. At least this is our experience in so far as we are not persons of deep faith. But, fortunately, everyone can be a person of deep faith. At some deep level, we know that we are not mutually alienated from each other and that we do have sufficient being. The practice of raising this knowledge is the process of becoming a deeper person of faith in experience as well as exponentially. There are exercises for cultivating this transition in every culture and tradition. We can learn from any or from all of them.

Through talking with one another, sharing experiences, teaching, and encouraging one another, we're helping each other know that we are deeply related, that we are all precious and deserving, that the universe is our home, that we can feel safe on the deepest level of our being. In this mutual support, the sense of oneness that is the hallmark of the person of deep faith is

increasing. Mutual respect is the only possible foundation for a free, just, equal, and responsible society, and deep experiences of faith is the ultimate ground of that respect. With freedom from the need to promote one's self or one's nature, tradition, or religion by devaluing others comes a great release of energy. What had been invested in protection is now available for caring for and rejoicing in others, or as Paul said, "In that renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Barbarian Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all and in all." Amen.