

Sunday, May 14, 2023

First Lesson: Romans 4: 13-25

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

Sermon Series: Conversations that Move Mountains
Week One

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We are beginning a new sermon series, “Conversations that Move Mountains.” This is a six week sermon series that will examine how conversations can transform our communities and interpersonal relationships with one another, so that we can get that much closer to becoming the beloved community we are called to be; where all are able to sit at the table of grace, love, mercy and justice together.

- For as I set the passion and motivation behind this sermon series; I am still reflecting on the Nehemiah Action Event, that was held at the Lancaster County Event Center on May 4th.

- Overall... let me just name that I consider the event to have been very successful.
- For 1105 members came to this event, to learn about the proposed solutions for mental health reform and criminal justice reform that were presented by *Justice in Action*.
- Furthermore, there were three council members; Christa Yoakum, Sandra Washington and James Michael Bowers and 1 county commissioner; (Rick Vest) who was in attendance, in which both of the steering committees of mental health and Criminal Justice asked for commitments from, to support and work on our proposed solutions.
- Therefore, just a quick cliff note version for people who were not able to attend the Nehemiah event; the mental health care steering committee was proposing establishing a navigator program in our mental health care system to help people navigate through the maze

of mental health resources that are available in our county;

- The criminal justice steering committee proposed 3 solutions of having (1) \$500,000 dollars implementing to help give more people access to diversion programs, (2) \$100,000 towards helping people towards making bail and reducing jail capacity and (3) having a real time dial that reflects the amount of people actually being housed in jail.
- And this is where things began to get interesting from my perspective during the event, hence why I believe that a sermon series about the importance of conversations is necessary to have.
- For two out of three of the council members were pretty clear in their support of what we were proposing to do on the mental health side and vocalized a rather enthusiastic yes to supporting and committing to work on our proposed solutions regarding mental health.

- However, the third council member; James Michael Bowers, made it very clear that regarding mental health, he would commit to **working on a solution** to the mental health crisis, but not necessarily **our proposed solution**.
- Similarly, regarding the criminal justice proposal made to County Commissioner Rick Vest; the criminal justice team was visibly stumped, once they were presented with new information that no decisions could be made for 2 out of 3 of the proposed solutions, because of getting a new jail director; something we all were learning for the very first time, along with the 1105 onlookers and listeners in attendance.
- Therefore, it was pretty apparent that the words that were needed for such a time as this, had escaped our brave negotiators; mainly because having tough conversations in front of 1105 listeners who consisted

of our family, friends, church congregants and more **is very stressful.**

- The other thing that can make conversations like this very tricky, especially in a setting like that of the Nehemiah Action Rally, is that there are some risks that we take when we venture into some of these conversations.
- For dare I suggest that **not all conversations** will bring forth warm and fuzzy feelings when broached.
- **Not all conversations** can be about the weather, or the things that make us feel good.
- One of the scriptures that comes to my mind immediately when I think about human language and the oral culture in which we live in, comes from Ecclesiastes 3:7; *there is a time to be silent and a time to speak.*

- Therefore, most of our tendency as human beings I have observed, is to be silent in those uncomfortable situations when words sometimes are needed.
- On the flip side, the human tendency is to speak, sometimes even superficially, when we don't know what to say, or at times when simply being quiet may be the better choice.
- Hence, why once again, I want us to explore a sermon series, that will help us to be more intentional in the conversations that we have with one another;
- I want to go deep in the Word and examine how other communities grappled with some of these same dilemmas— because dare I also proclaim, that I believe that we can learn something from these stories in the Bible.
- For the truth of the matter, as I reflect one more time on the Nehemiah Event, **I celebrate our** negotiators!

- **I celebrate them** because they had a very tough job, that I believe none of us could have done that much better with— under those same conditions; especially since this was the very first time any of us have ventured out of our comfort zones to advocate in this manner.
- However, I think it is important to name that having conversations in general can be tough, can I get an Amen?
- **I think about some** of our family dynamics and the tension that sometimes exist when we struggle to have conversations with our own family members;
- **I think about some** of our every day relationships, and all of the un-saids that we hold onto for dear life, out of fear of not being heard or not being seen or not being valued in our thoughts and truths and needs.

- **Sometimes these struggles exist** in our communication because some of us were not taught how to communicate—- especially if there is conflict.
- **Some of these struggles exist** in our communication out of fear of us saying the wrong thing, or hurting someone's feelings, or being deemed as being too rude, or unkind, or too aggressive.
- **Some of these struggles exist** in our communication simply because having some conversations are just plain difficult...especially when some conversations may challenge the narrative that already exists, or pushes against the status quo!
- For I don't know about you, but I have experienced stomach aches, sore throats, tears and down right been frozen in fear in times of communication, all because I desperately feared the outcome of having the conversation in the first place.
- Will the relationship be severed?

- Will the metaphorical door to this relationship be permanently closed?
- Will every one abandon me, if I don't communicate correctly?
- Am I preaching anyone's story this morning?
- For I submit, to have effective conversations that really moves mountains, **it takes** continuous study;
- **It takes** continuous prayer;
- **It takes** tremendous courage;
- **It takes** a measure of unwavering faith to trust that the conversations that come forth, although at times may be uncomfortable, are necessary, if we wish to make the world a **more just** place for everyone.
- Thereby making the rationale behind this sermon series **is for us** to be able by God's grace, to apply God's word to our everyday situations; **to help transform our situations;** to be in line with God's vision for humanity.

- For me, part of God's vision can be found in Genesis 1:28; that calls for humanity to be fruitful and multiply.
- You see for me, this charge far exceeds the literal sense of you and I being able to physically procreate.
- For as I bring in our first lesson this morning of Romans into our discussion this morning, there is an important conversation occurring in this text, that undergirds my belief— **that you and I were called to more than just procreation.**
- For on this day in which we celebrate mothers, which for me includes the mothers both here and in the forever more; mothers to be; mothers who are in mourning; to the care-givers who serve as mothers with perhaps a different title; grandmother, father, aunt, sister, cousin, brother and so forth;
- I stopped by to proclaim that we have been put on this Earth **more than to just procreate;**

- Although one of my greatest achievements in life has been to be a mother, I know that this is not all that God has called us to.
- For the important conversation that needs to be extracted for not just the benefit of the listeners of this day, but the listeners of our day as well, is that all of us are contained in the promise that verse 13 names in our Romans text this morning.
- For when verse 13 declares that *For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith;*
- This message was contained in a letter from Paul, that was in my biblical imagination, meant to spark a meaningful conversation with a community of listeners that had varying, sometimes conflicting ideas, regarding matters of their own faith and salvation.

- For the book of Romans was written by the apostle Paul in approximately 57-58 C.E. as a letter, or epistle, to the church in Rome.
- It was a letter instructional in nature--intended to provide direction, encouragement, and guidance to that community of believers.
- It was a letter intended as a gesture of love and encouragement and an acknowledgment of the difficulties that all believers face.
- What made this much needed dialogue so difficult to absorb for some, is because in Rome per biblical scholars; there existed two distinct Churches; the Church of the Jewish Christians and the Church of the Gentile Christians; in which both groups of people had very different understandings of whom this covenantal promise included, and how one would obtain it.
- Furthermore, at the time Paul wrote this letter, he had never visited the church in Rome.

- Indeed, Romans was actually written while he was in Corinth (a church addressed in two other letters and books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Corinthians) during his third missionary journey.
- In other words, Paul was writing to a group of people he did not personally know, but whom he considered to be his brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Furthermore, why this letter was especially important to this community, was to essentially settle a controversial debate, to let this entire community of both Jews and Gentile to know that all were included in the promises made to Abraham.
- It was a letter naming that all were part of this Abrahamic promise that is obtained not by the works of law, **but by our faith alone** in the saving justice of Jesus.

- However, let me just name that this letter was just as complex for the people then to absorb and process, as perhaps it is for us to absorb and process today.
- For if you remember a few weeks ago when I preached on the topic of “More Grace,” and presented to you all of the atonement theories; what we are seeing in Paul’s letter essentially, is his atonement theology coming to light in vs 25 of our Roman’s lesson that says *It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,*

25 who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

- For what Paul was essentially naming is that the world is condemned and rescued through Christ death on the cross.

- Thereby making the million dollar question become, what does this rather dense conversation mean for us today?
- For what exactly are we inheriting?
- And this is where our working definition of grace comes in again that we have spent a few weeks on already...
- To reiterate that grace is God desires to step into each of our situations and make a worthwhile difference.

2. Thereby making **grace** a true gift to all of humanity, that would give each and every one of us every chance **to be better, to do better, to live out our best selves**— to become the fullness of what it means to be that image of God.

3. It is a **grace** that grants each of us new life in the here and the now and the forevermore!

- Therefore **what we are inheriting** is an opportunity to restore ourselves.
- **What we are inheriting** is an opportunity to renew ourselves.
- **What we are inheriting** is a second chance to do better, to be better to live out our Imago Dei, in spite of our trespasses, in spite of our sins;
- **What we are inheriting** is the promise of new life in the here, now and the forevermore;
- This is the conversation that needs to be clearly extracted from my perspective.
- Furthermore, the ultimate conversation that I feel led to clearly proclaim on Paul's behalf is that it will take all of us a measure of faith to really embrace this inheritance;

- **In our Wednesday Applying the sermon to Life Class, our table was really drawn to vs 18 of our Romans passage that said that Abraham hoped against hope that this inheritance applied to him.**
- For to hope against hope, means to hope or wish for with little reason or justification.
- Another way that **we hope against hope**, is when I always pray in worship, God of the great mustard seed;
- For Matthew 17:20, tells us "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."
- I was especially encouraged by this imagery of the mustard seed on Wednesday night, to have a scientist sitting at our table who expressed working with mustard seeds.

- She described how the mustard seeds gets everywhere, under the fingernails and they spread without knowing, not to mention the mustard seed grows fast.
- Thereby making the ultimate conversation for us all to retain and celebrate from this sermon, is praise that **having faith the size of a mustard seed is enough...in fact it is more than enough!**
- For as I bring in our gospel this morning of Matthew more directly; essentially we are seeing others exhibit this mustard size faith and God doing great things with it.
- Beginning with verse 9, Jesus teaches us through the tax collectors that were generally scowled upon in this day, that how we begin to utilize our mustard seed faith, is we do so by following Jesus.
- For one of the reasons why the text of Matthew is pointing out the tax collectors and sinners in this passage, is to highlight the theme of God's acceptance

for all; to remove any mountains of doubt, that some could be excluded in this command.

- For all of us have the ability to follow Christ and God can do great things through each of us by us deciding to do so.
- Furthermore, how you and I follow Christ in today's time, is by intentionally investing our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness to the Church who commits to doing God's work of mercy, compassion and justice for all.
- Furthermore, we begin to witness others demonstrating their mustard seed faith in our gospel in vs 18, the leader coming before Jesus whose daughter just died, asking Jesus to lay hands on her and trusting that this would make her live;
- Then vs 20, the popular story of the woman with the issues of blood for 12 years where no doctor could diagnose her, and the public ostracized her; leaving her

to rely on her own mustard seed of faith with the last thought.... “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” (Vs 21)

- Folks this is a long way of naming, that **this is what hoping against hope** looks like at its finest...
- **This is what demonstrating mustard seed faith looks like at its finest...**
- For I am certain that God alone knows that our human capacity is limited....
- Often times in life I have found that all you and I can do is muster up a mustard seed of faith in the midst of the colossal mountains that we are faced with....
- But my spiritual aha moment— the main conversation that I want to have with you today— is that all you and I have to do is simply **show up** — and the Holy Spirit will take care of the

fertilization process of our mustard seed
contributions;

- All we have to do is **show up** in our communities,
- **Show up** in our families,
- **Show up** in our work places,
- **Show up** in our schools,
- **Show up** in our church communities,
- **All we have to do is show up** and follow Jesus in our own unique talents and contributions....
- And the the imagery of these mustard seeds spreading everywhere from our Wednesday conversation will begin to come to life....
- Similar to how our gospel of Matthew closes in verse 26, where it says *And the report of this spread through all of that district.*
- For by God's grace **our efforts** will grow...
- **Our ideas** will grow...
- **Our impact** will grow....
- **Our love** will grow

- Revealing to us all just how powerful having faith in God of this magnitude really is:
- Where Matthew 13: 31-32 teaches us that *The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field; which indeed is smaller than all seeds but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.*
- Thereby revealing to us all that the mustard seed is enough....in fact...it is more than enough!
- Thanks be to God!