

Sunday, June 11, 2023

First Lesson: Genesis 11: 1-9

Gospel Lesson: Mark 16: 9-15

Sermon Series: Conversation that Move Mountains Week 5

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- We are continuing in week five of our sermon series, *Conversations that Move Mountains*. This is a six-week sermon series that will examine how conversations might 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.
- So the conversation that I feel led to continue with (mainly because it was a conversation that really resonated with our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life group), is to expand on why the thumbs demonstration that I preached about two Sundays ago, is so crucial in our work for justice for all;
- For just a quick refresher, I shared how on a board that I am currently serving, there were often times as a board,

that we would come to an impasse regarding certain proposals that were brought forth.

- To address this, one of my colleagues proposed that we implement a thumbs voting process in these instances where unity was called for and necessary; **where a thumbs up** meant that the individual was for the proposal, **thumbs down** meant that the individual was against said proposal, and the **thumbs in the middle** meant that the individual still had some questions and concerns, but is open to moving forward with the proposal and the will of the body.
- The rule was that if we had majority thumbs up with some thumbs in the middle and no thumbs down, **we would move forward on said proposal;**
- On the contrary, if there were any thumbs down, we would pause and listen to and address the concerns, and when there was a natural stopping point in the conversation, we would call for another vote, with the hope that the thumbs down folks would be comfortable enough to move somewhere in the middle, to allow said proposal to move forth.

- So let's take a closer look at what these thumbs really mean and see if we can tie in our scriptures and present social climate in this process ; for although, it may seem that I explained this thumbs process pretty clearly;
- I feel led to name that there is so much more to this process and I will share with you why;
- For a person **to be in a thumbs up position**, I need to say first and foremost, that this takes a measure of faith for a person to choose such a position in the first place.
- **For a thumbs up** in my experience, does not always mean that we will know or have all of the answers.
- **A thumbs up** does not mean that we will have all of the solutions.
- **A thumbs up** does not even mean that we will have a big picture of the situation at hand.
- **A thumbs up**, on the contrary, means that we are willing to embark on a journey by faith with the Holy Spirit guiding us, that will hopefully lead us to a solution, or a resolution, or a desired mission or a desired outcome.
- So by this level of understanding and consideration, if we turn to our gospel this morning, we see a few people

mentioned, that were in a metaphorical thumbs up position;

- For in their encounters with Jesus, the proposal that was on the table essentially, was for these folks to be willing to share their encounters of Jesus— with others, so that they too can be transformed.
- And so before naming these individuals and their thumbs up commitment, let me first share that with our gospel this morning; in the two oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark ends with verse 8.
- A few manuscripts have another (shorter, and very different) ending.
- Therefore, we can deduce that this is why there have been questions of the genuineness of these last twelve verses, which has not been finally and fully settled, but their authenticity is definitely open to question.
- However, I am grateful to have access to these inclusions, for we are given a brief summary of several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus; in which I am

able to paint a picture for us, what a thumbs up could look like.

- Therefore, I would like to focus on the disciple named in our gospel this morning who gave a thumbs up commitment to Jesus was Mary Magdalene (v. 9) , whom was described very dramatically in John 20:1–18; as being arguably the first person on the scene to discover that the tomb was empty; in which brings me a great sense of joy to see that this time, a woman is being specifically named.
- For Mary was a Jewish woman from the fishing town Magdala, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.
- **Her name is mentioned 12 times in the Gospels, more than most of the apostles.**
- Mark and Luke recorded the healing of demons from Mary's life in their Gospel accounts.
- **Maurice Casey**, the author of *Jesus of Nazareth*, surmises Mary must have suffered from severe emotional or psychological trauma to deem an exorcism necessary.

- For she was battered and bruised, injured and in agony from the suffering demon possession entailed.
- Mary lost all control and dignity, along with everything she knew in her previous life.
- Beauty and wealth did not spare her from the evil that assailed and attacked her every hour of every day.
- Not to mention, as I have shared before regarding Mary Magdalene, that Mary was a common Jewish name.
- This is why some thought it was Mary Magdalene that poured expensive perfume on Jesus feet, when most scholars now believe that it was Mary of Bethany.
- Either way, it has been proposed that because of the confusing of the two, an inaccurate version of a promiscuous Mary Magdalene circulated.
- And I share all of this to show how courageous it was for Mary Magdalene **to give a thumbs up** to Jesus request in the first place;
- For **many people** judged Mary Magdalene;
- **Many people** ostracized Mary Magdalene;
- **Many people** discounted Mary Magdalene and called her every name but a child of God;

- So for this woman **to give a thumbs up**, when everyone else had given her a thumbs down, for a myriad of reasons and rumors, **was nothing short of a miracle in itself.**
- It sort of reminds me of the alienated people that have been discounted time and time again in the Church as a whole; for in my eyes, they are **nothing short of a miracle from my perspective as well.**
- For as I reflect on a sobering but God moment that stood out for me in Bishop David Wilson's address to our Great Plains Conference;
- I was moved when he stated how in awe he was of the LGBTQ+ people, that still chooses to remain Methodists, when essentially in light of our conversation, **so many people have given this community a thumbs down as well.**
- Similar to how as I reflect on how women in leadership **have been given a thumbs down;**
- How disabled people **have been given a thumbs down,**

- How Black and Brown People **have been given a thumbs down,**
- How neurodivergent people **have been given a thumbs down,**
- And poor people,
- And immigrant people,
- And the list goes on and on, until as Adam Hamilton noted at the conference regarding our LGBTQ+ community, **people no longer feel like people!**
- Yes Church family, I believe we have cracked the code for **why being in a thumbs down position is such a dangerous and painful place for us to be resolved to be in;**
- And that is because the threat is that when we stay stuck in this thumbs down position, we are in fact contributing **to people no longer feeling like people.**
- **For to be in a thumbs down position,** means that we are not open to personal and communal transformation;
- Furthermore, **to be in a thumbs down position** means to me, that we are not in tune with the Holy Spirit;

- For as I bring in our first lesson of Genesis into our conversation, it paints a very clear picture in my mind, what being stuck in a thumbs down position could look like at its finest and God's response to this position.
- For the picture contained in these verses, is that of a large company of people, consisting of nearly all the descendants of Noah, migrating slowly southeastward from the mountains of Ararat back to the plains of Mesopotamia.
- They had **one language** and **one speech**, or more literally, "one lip" and "one word"—one way of forming the sounds and one vocabulary.
- When they came to **the land of Shinar**, the broad fertile plain between the Tigris and the Euphrates where Babylon later stood, they stopped migrating and planned to set up permanent residence.
- They counseled together to make kiln-burnt brick and put it together with **slime** or "bitumen" and build **a city, and a tower**.
- There were eventually many great, walled cities in Mesopotamia in antiquity, of course, and one of the chief

characteristics of most of them was a tower known as a *ziggurat*, usually crowned by a temple dedicated to the city deity.

- It was apparently the first *ziggurat*, which was planned at this time, probably on the site of the city of Babylon itself.
- It is worthy of special note that at this early period, the genius of these people manifested itself in their invention of kiln-burnt brick, which became one of humanity's best building materials, and continues so to the present.
- Although there was doubtless a religious significance to the tower itself, most scholars agree that it probably did not represent a developed state of idolatry.
- It appears certain that it represented a humanistic venture— from which God was excluded.
- The later development of idolatry here seems to indicate that this tower signifies early human's attempt at **self-salvation—another way to heaven.**
- For God had commanded Noah and his sons to populate the earth, a command which necessitated their scattering abroad.

- Now they announced their purpose to stay together and to build a city and tower **for themselves**, with the tower reaching unto heaven itself, that they might make a name for themselves—a name which would hold them together.
- Thereby revealing to us all in this story, God’s response and heart of the matter beginning at vs 5 when God said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”
- In other words, I stopped by to proclaim that God was not ok with these people’s thumbs down approach, for their only goal was to serve themselves.
- For when we seek to only serve ourselves, **someone will inevitably be left out.**
- When we seek to only make a name for ourselves, **someone’s name in the process will be left out.**

- Furthermore, the ultimate conversation I feel led to name is that in both our first lesson and gospel this morning; the Triune God, our Creator, Jesus our sustainer and the Holy Spirit our redeemer is proclaiming that God is not ok and will never be ok with God's children being left out either!
- Furthermore, as I step out of these passages, I feel led to name that as a result of being at Annual Conference, I am even more committed to remain at this table of United Methodism.
- Why?
- Well because first and foremost, it was very evident that with the 750 Churches that are still very much alive and present in our Conference of the Great Plains alone (thereby keeping us as the largest conference in the south central jurisdiction)— that there are others who are not ok with any of God's children being excluded either.
- For **as I listened** to powerful stories from my colleagues who chose to remain; as their own congregations of whom they have loved and faithfully led, have decided to

move their thumbs down, and disaffiliate from our conference;

- **As I listened to** Bishop David Wilson, Adam Hamilton, and many others present a way forward, that would give grace to those whose thumbs may be wavering somewhere in the middle, with the assurance that God's grace and unconditional love will be there in their journey;
- I felt relief,
- I felt hope,
- I felt love....
- For Adam Hamilton stated it perfectly when he reflected on the last South Central Jurisdictional Conference, in which three bishops were elected of which two have come from our conference;
- The first being Bishop Dee Williamston, from the Great Plains, assigned to the Louisiana Conference;
- And Bishop Wilson who made United Methodist history, as the first Native American episcopal leader;

- Rev. Hamilton stated that he experienced a movement of the people that used to be driven by conflict, now being driven by the Spirit.
- For me, Church family, I experienced this same phenomena happening with us all at Annual Conference.
- 750 Churches represented by both laity and clergy, all making a commitment to be thumbs up or thumbs in the middle;
- 750 Churches represented by both laity and clergy, all praying for a way forward together, with the hope that one resolution called the Christmas Covenant will pass, as it pertains to our LGBTQ + issue;
- It is a resolution that teaches us that having our thumbs somewhere as the middle as a denomination regarding our queer community, may not be completely ideal for those of us who want complete inclusion and acceptance for all immediately;
- However it is a great start, that will keep us all at the table;

- For the Christmas Covenant resolution that our Great Plains Conference passed as a resolution, is a set of legislation and constitutional amendments submitted to the United Methodist Church's (UMC) General Conference, with the goal of establishing regional equity in the structures of the church for missional effectiveness while sustaining connectional unity. It is rooted in the following values:
  - Connectional relationships rooted in mission
  - Respect for contextual ministry settings
  - Legislative equality for regional bodies of the church
- The legislation was conceived during the Christmas season of 2019.
- For Christmas is an auspicious time for Methodists, as it reminds us of the Christmas Conference of 1784 that gave birth to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, one of the original predecessor bodies of the UMC.

- Therefore, proponents pray that the Christmas Covenant would be a rallying point for a renewed and revived UMC around the world.
- For in lay persons terms, **this covenant** will allow all pastors to decide for themselves, whom they will marry and give us pastors who are thumbs up on marrying same sex couples the ability to do so without penalty or risk of being defrocked.
- **And let me be clear that this pastor is thumbs up on marrying same sex couples!**
- For there are still places that I as an African American woman cannot preach nor am I welcome to pastor and there are still metaphorical tables out there where I too am not fully welcomed to sit at— and so I will not keep perpetuating the same behaviors that has isolated so many people for a myriad of reasons;
- Not to mention the words of Pastor Martin Niemoller's poem, who was a German, Anti-Nazi theologian and Lutheran pastor, that was written on behalf of those who have been slain during the holocaust is a sobering poem that I will never forget:

First they came for the Communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Communist  
Then they came for the Socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Socialist  
Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist  
Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew  
Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me

- So I will say it again, yes when given the opportunity, my queer siblings of faith... I will speak out for you....I will marry you....

- **This Christmas covenant that was affirmed and voted on from our Great Plains Conference to be submitted as a resolution to the General Conference** will remove the harmful language concerning our LGBTQ+ siblings in the Book of Discipline regarding sacred worth, value and eliminate language that would

prevent called persons from the ability to be ordained and licensed in the Methodist Church.

- **This covenant** affirms all of our Methodist doctrine that affirms the Apostles Creed, Trinity and our belief in God's unconditional grace and love for all.
- **This covenant** essentially allows the people to be committed to a thumbs up or thumbs in the middle position, leaving room for the Holy Spirit to continue to be at work in our spiritual journeys and collaborations with one another;
- Thereby revealing to us that unification is indeed possible...
- For once again unification does not mean that we all will necessarily agree,
- Unification means that we are all willing to remain at the table!
- For as a Great Plains Conference, we also voted to honor the disaffiliation deadline of April 30,2023, which means in laypersons terms that we are done being driven by conflict,

- We are in fact committing to being thumbs up on being driven towards one mission;
- To do as our gospel Mark 16:15 instructs us to... to Go into all the world and proclaim the good news<sup>[b]</sup> to the whole creation.
- I want to publicly thank this congregation, and John Lee who has faithfully served as our lay delegate to this Annual Conference of Great Plains for many years— - thank you all for being committed to staying at the table!