

Sunday, June 18, 2023

First Epistle: Romans 5:1-8

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 9: 16-26

Sermon Series: Conversations that Move Mountains Week 6

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- We are concluding our six week 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.
- Furthermore in thinking about this statement that I have just made; our work therefore becomes making space at the table for others, **when we notice that grace, love, mercy and justice is not being made available to them.**

- Therefore, as we wrap up this sermon series, in looking at our two scriptures this morning, I believe that there are some powerful lessons revealed to us for us to consider, on how we might begin to make this space at the table for others.
- And so to help us to discover these takeaway lessons in which I have narrowed down to be 5 lessons, I think it is helpful to do a line by line exegesis/study of these texts, because I stopped by to name that there are some powerful tools and learning moments that I really believe will help and inform our work.
- Therefore in looking at Romans 5: 1-2 that most scholars agree was written by the apostle Paul in approximately 57-58 C.E. as a letter, or epistle, to the church in Rome;
- For the Book of Romans was a letter instructional in nature--intended to provide direction,

encouragement, and guidance to that community of believers.

- So in looking at the first two verses of this letter that states that we hope will give us some direction.. it states;

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.**

- For me, **the first lesson** that we can learn from these two verses, is that when you and I decide to place our faith in Jesus and all of His teachings on love, justice, inclusion and more; not only are we justified through Christ by grace that allows us to enter into **the peace of complete reconciliation with God** or **enter into the security and calm of acceptance of God**, but we are also justified to begin to initiate conversations with others, to

help them to begin to seek out this same peace through God for themselves.

- For what I have learned in my own life experiences, is that often times in life... **we go through, so that we can help others through...**
- Often times we will go through our own life journeys of the good, bad and ugly, where from those learnings and experiences, we are then called to share those learnings with others.
- For as I think about Pastor Caity being in the Transition in Ministry Program, where this is her last Sunday being with us; this was exactly the theology that our conference of the Great Plains had in mind—when they began this program;
- To pair young clergy with more experienced clergy, **to teach and show them the ropes of ministry;**

- To prepare them to embrace their call of what it means to order the life of the Church in the four areas of Word, Sacrament Service and Order;
- Where although we will miss the presence of Caity and Tyler as being on this staff;
- Our partnership was only meant to last for just a while... two years in our instance;
- To give this younger clergy couple, a cliff note version, of what to expect, or in the least, to give them some inkling of what to anticipate;
- Trusting and believing that when Pastor Caity and Tyler arrives in their own two Church communities, they will be able to recognize and recall some of the experiences from Lincoln First, that will help equip them in their new journey;
- Similar to how on the story of the Walk to Emmaus found in Luke 24: 13-35;
- When the Disciples were downfallen **because they thought that Jesus had left them,**

- The Word tells us that the disciples did not know that Jesus had been walking with them in that conversation, until essentially the walk had come to an end and Jesus went away;
- And my favorite part of this story was in Luke 24: 30-32 where it says;

As they sat down to eat, [b] he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to

them. **31 Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!**

32 They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”

- Pastor Caity and Tyler as you leave this place of Lincoln First to embark upon your own journeys;

- Remember that Christ is always with you in a similar way;
- Remember that Lincoln First is always with you... all which informs us that the best is yet to come!
- **For once again....We go through...so we can help others through!**
- Then Romans 5: 3-5 **gives us our second lesson** of what our conversations should look like with one another, in hopes of making space for others at the table, where it says;

And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance,

4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

- Therefore, **the second lesson** that emerges from these verses, is that when you and I do sit down with others in our conversations, **our conversations need to be transparent in our afflictions;**
- **Our conversations need to be** substantive (meaning having a firm base in reality, meaningful), in how we share our life learnings
- **Our conversations need to be** honest as we relay our stories to one another;
- **Our conversations need to be** intentionally open, for these are not just empty words we are sharing with one another for just the sake of sharing them ;

- On the contrary, it is our conversations towards one another, that can **either reinforce** those mountains that keep us gridlocked into place;
- Or our words can help to liberate one another in ways that will equip us to do God's work!
- And I have shared this story in other ways before, as I try to exemplify this point, but one of the greatest gifts that my father (who has been gone from this earthly realm, to be with Our Lord and Savior close to 8 years ago to pancreatic cancer) has given us as his family, is the gift of speaking to us openly what he was experiencing during his last days of transition; in addition with the gift of sharing with us honestly how much he would miss us when he passed on.
- For it was as if my dad wanted to give us some verbal reassurance that physically, our bodies itself would be able to handle the earthly transition, so that our faith in the Higher Power of

God might be that much more magnified; although any one in the room with him, could physically tell that he was still mesmerized, as his six senses began to fade away;

- This is a long way of my naming that even in my father's active dying phase, I saw the hand of God at work within him— which was a miracle all in itself;
- For my father was not a church-going a man;
- Furthermore up until that point, I honestly had no idea where my father's faith in God really lied;
- However even in this reality, the gift of love and honesty that my father verbally shared with each one of us, my mother, two brothers and myself, was bar none one of the most life-giving conversations I have ever had to date!
- For my father shared in such an open manner, to ensure that we as his family, would not have any

questions or concerns regarding how he felt about us;

- Furthermore I can tell you that none of us as his family, has had any questions about how he felt about us.
- For it was as if my dad knew that **there would be other mountains that we would need to work on moving out of the way— and he did not want to be one of them!**
- Furthermore it was in his last verbal words that I will always carry with me; “You’re a good daughter! You are a good pastor... that really informed me what I must continue to do in my own work....
- That leads us all to **the third lesson that** encapsulates Romans 5:6-8; for I believe we have cracked another code in what our work must therefore become;

- For when you and I are engaging with people, you and I can bank on the fact that every person we are interacting with, **has some mountain or mountains that they are facing**—hence why part of how we love God and love Neighbor, **is we focus on not becoming another mountain in someone's life, that might keep them from being able to sit at the table;**
- **That might keep** them from becoming their best selves;
- **That might keep** someone else from experiencing God's love, and transforming grace for themselves;
- A grace that would allow us to be better, to do better and to live out our fullest Imago Dei.
- **This is why I am able** to make statements in support for the LGBTQ+ communities; as I pray for the United Methodist Denomination to be able to do the same...

- **This is why I am able** to make statements in support of women being in leadership...as I pray for the Southern Baptist Convention and others like them to be able to do the same...
- **This is why on most** social issues of injustice, I can make statements of support for any community or communities that have been isolated and marginalized, for I believe that we all should have the same opportunities to become our best selves through Christ Jesus.
- Furthermore as I take in these verses of Romans 5: 6-8 in a new way one last time, that states; For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

- Christ teaches us in this powerful act, that **when we are all weakened**, because the mountains that we are facing are that dense;
- **When we are all weakened**, because we have lost our will and strength to move the mountains ourselves...
- Then this is when we as communities, must make sure that our words do not reinforce those mountains; or that our words and actions do not become one of those mountains.....
- On the contrary all of our conversations must be focused on moving the mountains, whatever they may be — and our gospel of Matthew teaches us how to do this.
- **For this is where the fourth lesson** of our conversations really emerges for me, that informs us that our conversations need to be focused on moving mountains in one another's lives!

- And I see this charge coming from Matthew 9: 16-17 that states; No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made.

17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are ruined, but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

- For me there is a powerful lesson on the approaches that we must take away in our conversations with one another.
- For as a side-note, at our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life, I spoke to the group a lot about why wineskins were an appropriate illustrate to begin with in this conversation of Matthew;
- We also decided that it may not be wise for me to do a wine demonstration for you all in the pulpit for a myriad of reasons;

- However, we were curious about why Matthew deemed this to be an important story of illustration for us to consider, as we seek to apply this to our conversations with one another;
- So in researching about wineskins, I learned that the use of bottles made from the skins of animals is very ancient.
- Water or wine bottles were frequently made from animal skins (Joshua 9:4, 13; Judges 4:19; 1 Samuel 1:24; 10:3; 2 Samuel 16:1; Nehemiah 5:18; Job 32:19; Psalms 119:83; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37).
- Such leather vessels are still popular among the Bedouin for their durability, portability, and accessibility, since they are mostly pastoral nomads and animal herding is their main occupation.
- The skins of goats were commonly taken for this purpose, and were usually fashioned to retain the figure of the animal.

- In preparing the bottle, the head and feet of the animal were cut off and the skin stripped whole from the body.
- The neck of the animal often made the neck of the bottle; in other cases one of the forelegs was used as an aperture through which the liquid was poured out.
- The thighs served as the handles, and by attaching straps to them, the bottle could be fastened to the saddle or slung over the shoulder of the traveler.
- For a large party, and for long journeys across the desert, the skins of camels or of oxen were used.
- Two of these, when filled with water, made a good load for a camel for they were coated with grease to prevent leakage and evaporation.
- **Making the critical part of this parable for us to understand that wineskins are not found objects; they don't grow on trees.**
- **A wineskin exists because someone made it.**

- Which further means that both wine and wineskins start out new, and both inevitably become old.
- For no power on earth can prevent this natural process, **and trying to thwart** it is trying to live in a world God didn't make.
- Furthermore in placing this conversation in the context it was written, Matthew sees Jesus in this parable as having brought something eschatologically new, not merely remodeling or patching up the old;
- For Jesus purpose of bringing something new in such a way was not to do away with the old, **but to fulfill and preserve it new;**
- Furthermore, a basic fundamental understanding of why such a conversation was needed in the first place, is because ideally the old garment represented in these times was thought to be of Judaism— and the new patch was Christianity;

- Hence why the conclusion of mixing of old and new can be risky business.
- However, **why we as a people in our conversations** must be willing to engage in this risky business;
- **Why our conversations** as one of our classmates named, **must be willing to engage in these paradigm shifts**—which essentially calls us for a major change in the worldview, concepts, and practices of how something works or is accomplished;
- **Is because this is where the major fifth lesson we learn is in these verses; that teaches us that it is through these paradigm shifts— that we actually are able to move these mountains!**
- For as I apply this to our world; there was once a school of thought in Article 1. Section 2 for instance. The “three Fifts Clause,” where although the United Stated Constitution did not refer directly to slaves, it did not ignore them entirely.

- For Article one, section two of the Constitution of the United States, declared that any person who was not free, would be counted as three-fifths of a free individual for the purposes of determining congressional representation.
- The "Three-Fifths Clause" thus increased the political power of slaveholding states. It did not, however, make any attempt to ensure that the interests of slaves would be represented in the government....a staggering clause that has devastated our relationships among different people of different ethnicity and races even today....**a paradigm shift is needed....**
- For there was and still is a school of thought for instance, that women's full and equal participation in all facets of society as being a fundamental human right is still very much debatable today.... **a paradigm shift is needed...**

- For there was and still is a school of thought for instance, of negative attitudes towards the disabled that essentially disempowers people, in which the disability perception socially excludes these persons from receiving education and limits the participation in social activities, which thereby excludes them from becoming a contributing and valued member of society.....therefore I decree and declare by the authority of the Holy Spirit that **a paradigm shift is needed!**
- **For** I could go on and on with the the areas of our society **where a paradigm shift is needed;**
- However, the most important lesson we learn from Jesus in our gospel today, is that **this is why** our conversations matter;
- **This is why** we should continue to be open to new ideas, education, revelations and experiences;

- **So that the paradigm shift that is desperately needed** can occur within us, that will allow us as a humanity, to really begin to discern and detect, Gods movement in our Social movements;
- For **it is when we** allow the Holy Spirit to help us to enter into these conversations;
- **It is when we allow** our thumbs down positions to begin to move into an open space of learning and transformation,
- That you and I will begin to witness the miracles of Matthew 9: 18-26 occur all around us;
- **We begin to witness** our children being resurrected from the dead of this fractured society;
- **We begin to witness** bleeding systems of oppression in our communities being finally healed and delivered;
- And this is because by God's Grace **we have learned** how to make space at the table;

- By God's Grace, **we have reached the peak of the mountaintop** and realized the overwhelming and grueling climb was worth it...
- For the view... it's beautiful!
- May the Words from this conversation continue to move the mountains necessary, so that we can continue to kiss the Earth with our feet!
- Thanks be to God!