

Sunday, May 26, 2023

First Lesson: Romans 7: 14-25

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 4: 1-11

Sermon Series: Conversations that Move Mountains
Week 3

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are continuing in week three 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.
- Therefore, in looking at our lessons of scriptures today, the conversation that I feel led to have for our time together, is to begin with a question for us all to continue to explore and ponder together, and that is, “What are the things that keeps us from really being able to communicate with one another?”

- What are the things that keeps us from being able to really converse with one another?
- For the feedback that I received from Wednesday Night's group, *Applying the Sermon to Life*, is that one of the statements that I learned really resonated with the group was in the declaration that I made in last week's sermon that stated, **“that there is no conversation that any of God's people should be afraid or hesitant to have with one another.”**
- For my theological rationale for stating this, came from Romans 8:28, that essentially teaches us that we are one community, called according to one purpose; thereby informing us that in all things, God will work through our efforts and turn it out for good, all because we are striving to love God and love our neighbor!
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- Therefore, the reason why I believe that this statement connected with the group, is because the truth of the matter I suspect, is that **a lot of us have something to say, concerning** all of the pressing matters that are directly affecting our city and world;

- **I am certain that a lot of us have words to say**, that goes beyond even the scope of our recent work with *Justice in Action*, in which we have narrowed down two key issues of immediate concerns within our county and city, involving mental health reform and criminal justice reform;
- For what *Justice in Action* has really emboldened many of us church folk to really begin to consider and think about, is this idea that the Church **should have something to say**, when God's people are suffering at the hands of systems— that can affect positive change and relief, but chooses not to.
- Therefore, **I am certain that many of us have something to say**, about the new bill LB574 for instance, that was signed by our Governor Jim Pillen; that includes a 12-week abortion ban, which takes effect immediately, and includes regulation of puberty blockers for minors and a ban on gender-altering surgeries for minors, which both take effect on October 1.
- **I am certain that many of us have something to say**, concerning all of the disaffiliations that are occurring

across the denomination; roughly 150-plus churches from the Great Plains Conference alone—over concerns that the UMC has grown too liberal on key cultural issues—most importantly, LGBTQ rights.

- **I am certain that many of us have something to say**, regarding poverty, homelessness, our current government, healthcare, refugees and immigration, racial discrimination, economic insecurity and more.
- Hence why I believe that a sermon series that is searching for how we might converse in a way that moves some of these mountains, so that we can have real communication is necessary, if we desire to be able to move forward as a unified community.
- And for me, let me be clear that unification in my mind, does not necessarily mean, **that we will all agree on all matters of the concerns that we are raising.**
- For as an example, in this congregation, **I know that many of us have varying opinions** on all of the social issues and concerns that I have raised in this message and then some.

- Therefore in keeping this in mind, I think it is important for me to state clearly that for me, **unification does not involve you and I necessarily agreeing, as it is us being willing, to remain at the table, until a solution springs forth, that will make the community whole.**
- For I have been in a lot of boards, in which as a body, we were charged to move forth on a proposed solution.
- However, there have been many times where as a board, **we did not always agree** on the proposed solution, for a myriad of reasons.
- Therefore, one of the processes one of my boards has adopted, is a thumbs process that I have done in groups here at the Church; where a thumbs up means the person agrees with the proposal and is comfortable with moving forward; a thumbs in the middle, means that a person has some concerns with the proposal, but will go with whatever the majority of the body discerns is the way forward and not stop the process or progress;
- Finally a thumbs down, means that the person is not in agreement of the proposed solution; meaning that more discussion would need to be had.

- Therefore, when the board votes; if there are significantly all thumbs up, with some thumbs in the middle and no thumbs down, this means we are able to move forward; because again, the thumbs in the middle, is suggesting that one may not necessarily agree on said proposal, but will not hold up the process of the proposal moving forward.
- On the contrary if there are any thumbs down on the proposed solution upon the call for the vote, the board listens to the thumbs down concerns, which then calls for more discussion, which then invites us to keep taking a vote, until all thumbs can move up or somewhere in the middle.
- And I know, I just shared a lot in this demonstration, but I wanted to paint a picture for us all, that when I am up here suggesting that unification is possible, I am not doing so with rose colored glasses on.
- On the contrary, what I am trying to really communicate with us all, is this idea that **unification is possible**, when you and I are **committed to staying at the table**,

until we can all get our thumbs to align somewhere in the middle or upward.

- Furthermore, this type of healthy discourse and conversation that I am suggesting is not possible, unless we are all able to come to some level of reckoning, as the two individuals that I would like to unpack a little further this morning has come to; first starting with Paul in our first lesson and then with Jesus in our gospel this morning.
- **For in order for us to engage in any level of conversation and healthy discourse from my perspective,** it takes some level of self-awareness on our parts, in which our first lesson speaks to.
- Similarly, **in order for us to engage on any level of conversation and healthy discourse,** it takes some measure of spiritual discipline on our parts, in which our gospel speaks to.
- Therefore in looking at our first lesson of Romans, the question that I would like to raise is, “How does Paul express self-awareness in this lesson?” Furthermore,

why does having self-awareness essential in our conversations?

- Well for starters, a quick refresher of the book of Romans; 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.
- The is letter instructional in nature--intended to provide direction, encouragement, and guidance to that community of believers.
- Not to mention two weeks ago, the difficult thing that I named about Paul writing such a letter, is that Paul wrote this letter when he was in Corinth during his third missionary journey.
- Therefore, 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.
- All of this and more is why this section of Paul's letter in my opinion is so powerful, because lo and behold, you and I are witnessing Paul share a meaningful and moving confession, in a letter to people he didn't know.

- And I don't know about you, but I don't tend to be as forthright with my own information, especially in confessing my issues and my mess, **to people I don't know.**
- For there is a saying in the circles I tend to congregate in, that would quickly put a boundary up, to let someone know, **“Excuse me...but you don't know me like that..”**
- Furthermore, as a brief side-note, biblical scholars are really torn on when this confession really applied towards Paul's life journey.
- Was Paul referring to his Pre-Christian days, when he felt bound to the Pharasaic law as a devout Jew?
- Or was Paul referring to his journey as a Christian?
- Was Paul describing his struggles, before accepting Jesus in his life as his personal Lord and Savior?
- Or was Paul describing the process of sanctification, that one goes through as a Christian?
- And my initial response to these questions is, **“does it really matter?”**

- For what the Roman passage in 2023 ultimately reveals to us in my eyes, is a call for self-awareness, accountability and an understanding of the impact we have.
- For vs 13-17 of our Romans text, teaches us that the trouble is not with the law. It **is spiritual**, which means that we who comes from God who is Spirit, and shares God's nature....can rectify this concern that Paul is raising.
- Which also means that under the light of the law, the onus is on us, to be able to confess, when our human impulse does not align with God's Spirit.
- For according to Paul, our human impulse on the contrary is to be carnal—agreeable to the impulse of the human, sometimes called flesh, it is our human impulse to meet our own physical needs—and to do so quickly.
- This is why our whole world is designed to meet our human impulses, **whether it is through an app** that will allow us to deliver a bottle of mouthwash to our doorstep **or an app that will allow us** to find our life partners;

- I stopped by to suggest that our world is catered to fuel our human impulses....for which I'm not naming for any of us to stop using these apps for our pleasure and convenience,
- But this is a message to name, that we cannot resolve these social dilemmas that I have named and then some, with an app!
- The only way that we can resolve any of these issues together.... is through a conversation!
- **I'm talking about a conversation**, that includes self-aware people, ready to identify and own our own impact along with the baggage we carry while doing so; so that when it is time to come to the table to converse with one another, we know that we must first set down our bags, to make room for those who will need a seat at the table too.
- **I'm talking about a conversation** similar to a powerful conversation that we often reflect upon on this day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4 where it states *4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

- Then as I am back in the letter, vs 18-20 presents an even harder pill for us to swallow and consider, for it also describes the need for us to admit that the active impulses of our lives are therefore evil.
- Which then informs us that goodness is not measured by knowledge, so much as by choice and action; hence which made some of our sermon series like the King Effect series and the More Grace sermon series, difficult sermon series for many of us to be able to ingest and process; for many of us find it difficult to wrap our heads around this idea that we are intentionally evil or intentionally violent.
- Alas though, in vs 21-25, the search for some ray of hope goes on. Is there no feeling for law? If so, may one not hope that it will reinforce knowledge and choice, until there is a breakthrough to freedom and victory?
- For it is in these questions that Paul raises, that Paul does not share with us how his story on this journey concludes, nor does he provide any answers,
- However, there is a pivotal point where as the reader, we begin to sense that there is some reward, for an

individual who is willing to go through such an self-awareness process by doing so.

- For the biggest aha moment that I have made, as a result of this study and conversation today, is that when we are able to become more self-aware in this manner, this is what helps us to begin to identify our key issues, that could hinder us from being able to participate in healthy communication and discourse;
- For **when we are able to become more self-aware in this manner**, this in fact is part of what helps us to endure and survive and even thrive through the wilderness conversations and encounters that will inevitably come our way.
- For as I bring our gospel into a more direct conversation this morning, Jesus teaches us in his own conversation, that **to have this level of self-awareness, one must have spiritual discipline.**
- Similarly, part of us having spiritual discipline, takes a measure of self awareness— **to understand** what are our strengths and what are the areas that we need to grow in.

- **To understand** what are our personal hang-ups and to know what are our personal biases.
- **To understand** what are our motives and what may be our agendas;
- To discover then that **through this process**, if we find that we don't like what we see;
- **Through this process**, if we discover, that we are no longer comfortable with who we have become,
- **Then like** Jesus, we pray...for our gospel reveals Jesus did so for forty days and forty nights....
- **Then like** Jesus we fast; meaning we separate ourselves from anything that might distract us from these spiritual learning goals that I have been naming;
- **Then like** Jesus we seek counsel, from the One who knew us before we were formed in our Mother's womb,
- **Then like** Jesus through our Baptism we make a commitment to do the work, even in the midst of the painful discourse and rhetoric that may be coming our way;
- So that **like Jesus**, when those difficult conversations decide to finally make their way to our front doors, where

the world that represents Satan in our passage, **relies on our human impulses to** sidetrack us from our ultimate mission as a Church, of sharing God's love to all, that will help to set the captives free;

- **By telling us that** there is essentially no point in doing this work , (vs 3-4)
- **Or telling us that** God has abandoned us in this work (vs 5-7)
- **Or telling us** the false promises that we could gain more personal power if we discard this work (vs 8-9);
- It is because we have chosen to stay committed in this process of self awareness and spiritual discipline; it is because we have prepared ourselves to essentially be able to stay at the table; that we are now able to speak up in what is meant to be a diminishing, deflating conversation and say....

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

- **“For I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down.”**

•I mustn't come down... I will not come down.....until we all can have a little talk with Jesus whom we trust will show us how to make it right! (Nehemiah 6:3)

•All which lets us know that unification is possible....

•All which then informs us that healthy discourse and conversation is possible....

•And it is possible with us!