

Sunday, December 10, 2023

First Lesson Proverbs 3: 5-6

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 1-3, 11-18

Sermon Series: Questions that Move Mountains Week 5: Why are you Weeping?

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- We are in week 5 of an 8 -week sermon series called “Questions that Move Mountains?” This is a sermon series that invites us to unpack the questions that Jesus either asked or inspired; with the hope that our repeating First Lesson of Focus ; Proverbs 3: 5-6 that says to *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.* In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths; will take root into our hearts.
- This week the question that we are unpacking in our second week of Advent that is focusing on the candle of peace, is the question that both Jesus

and the disciples asked Mary Magdalene, “Why are you Weeping?”

- Before unpacking this question, I would like to talk a little bit more about the significance of this candle of peace.
- As we gaze upon its gentle flame, I am inviting us to consider the peace that Christ offers—a peace that goes beyond the tranquility of the world.
- **It is that peace** that comes from a deep and abiding relationship with our Savior—I’m referring **to a peace** that reassures us in times of trouble and chaos.
- In a world often filled with discord, the peace of Christ invites us to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation.
- With this knowledge, it may be a little surprising then **that peace can come** from this scriptural text from a place of tears.

- For in looking at the scripture and tradition from where our story is coming from, our story is found in the other gospels, but is painted just a little bit differently in the book of John.
- As in other Gospels, the first visit to Jesus' tomb occurs "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark"—that is on Sunday morning (which counts the first day of the week was sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday.)
- Therefore, "the first day of the week" is significant because it is traditionally believed to be the day of Jesus' resurrection, Sunday.
- However where some differences begin to occur in our story in John is that Mary Magdalene is accompanied by other women in the synoptic gospels of Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:10), **but in John she comes to the tomb alone.**

- In addition, Mary's role in the passion and Easter narratives, Mary Magdalene appears in Luke 8, where she is identified as a Galilean woman from whom Jesus had exorcised seven demons.
- It is important to distinguish the Gospel portrait of Mary Magdalene from the traditions that developed about her in Early Christianity and medieval periods.
- In other words, there is no biblical foundation for the popular portrait of her as a "sinful" woman or prostitute.
- Instead in our gospel of John, he portrays Mary Magdalene as the first disciple to proclaim the good news of Easter.
- And my response in learning this interesting piece of information, is "**It's about time...it's about time** that this woman gets some sort of justice in the way she is being portrayed in this story and within the church history as a whole."

- In knowing that the gospel of John decided to bring this image of Mary Magdalene is almost as satisfying to me as Jesus allowing the woman last week to go on with her life instead of being stoned!
- For the portrayal of women in the Bible and its reflection in today's society has been a subject of much debate, making it essential for us to critically examine these narratives.
- Because it is some of these negative narratives that make it difficult for women of today to live, thrive and excel.
- One of the earliest and most impactful portrayals is that of Eve in the Garden of Eden.
- Often, she is unfairly labeled as the temptress who led Adam astray.
- This interpretation has contributed to a historical perception of women as the source of sin and the downfall of humanity.

- In today's culture, media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions.
- Women are often objectified, reduced to stereotypes, or portrayed in one-dimensional roles. These representations perpetuate harmful beliefs about women's capabilities and worth.
- Despite progress, gender inequality persists in various forms – unequal pay, limited representation in leadership roles, and societal expectations that confine women to specific roles and more.
- These issues and more are furthermore deeply rooted in cultural norms and are often perpetuated by societal attitudes.
- This is a long way of my naming that I applaud our gospel today— for at least managing to restore this woman's sacred worth by not defaming her character.
- However, there is one other issue that needs to be dealt with possibly;

- And that is the two questions that are posed to Mary Magdalene, first by the angels in (v13) "Woman, Why are you weeping?" (As a side note, our class may have glossed over the fact that Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loves which is John the writer, did not in fact approach this woman with the question...it was the angels on the scene who asked her this question.)
- Secondly, the question is repeated but this time by the undisclosed Jesus in v 15... "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"
- In our Wednesday night class, *Applying the Sermon to Life*- regardless of who asked the question, it was pointed out that it is difficult to discern the tone in which both parties are using in approaching Mary.
- Was this question coming from a place of concern?
- Was this question coming from a place of scolding?

- Was this question coming from a place of frustration?
- From these questions, I felt led to ask the class, when was the last time they had a good cry themselves?
- There were some interesting responses from my question that revealed how some of the male students felt that men were held to a different standard when it comes to crying.
- For there seemed to be this general understanding **that men were not supposed to cry.**
- Similarly, some of the women classmates also weighed in **that they tend not to cry either.**
- There was a sense that some of the upbringing/ family of origin, did not grant permission for some to cry.
- There were some of our classmates that identified as being empathetic and sympathetic criers.

- Some of the classmates identified with being movie criers.
- Some of the classmates talked about this idea that the reason they do not cry is out of fear of being coined as “inconvenient criers.”
- A few of a our classmates I would frame them to be “constipated criers.”
- All in all, there were only a couple of students who shared that crying was something they did from time to time.
- There was one statement that came from one of our youth that I feel inspired to explore as it pertains to both Mary’s story and our story today—
- For he said **“crying is a signal that something has changed, which then invites us into social engagement to look for something more.”**
- Therefore applying this very perceptive revelation to our gospel this morning, a possible answer then to the question of “Woman...why are you weeping,”

could be that Mary's tears invites the reader **to take note that something has changed.**

- What has changed in our story is that Mary went to this tomb and expected to find Jesus there— **only to discover that something has changed!**
- For Mary most likely although sad that Jesus was brutally murdered, was prepared to anoint the body of Jesus with perfumes and spices, which was a common practice in biblical times.
- This in itself would have shown respect for the dead thereby providing a proper burial for Jesus;
- For it is also important to note that burial practices in the Bible were often influenced by cultural and societal norms of the time—so with Mary not being able to do this...she was stunned....she may have even felt like something had been taken from her; the privilege of at least being able to say her last good bye and gain some proper closure....but

instead Jesus body was gone—**something has changed.**

- Mary was in fact so caught up in this grief of her cultural customs being taken away, that she did not even realize that the second person on the scene to ask her “Woman, why are you weeping”...was the body that she was looking for...
- A body that revealed the saying that is written in 1 Corinthians 15: 55-58 is true; “Where oh death is your victory, where oh death is your sting— was standing right in front of her...but Mary could not see it.
- **Something has changed.**
- **Something has changed** with Lincoln First United Methodist Church— as I reflect on our conversation from last week— where we looked at the beautiful artistry of the triptych that was lovingly designed and engineered by prophetic women many of whom are with us today;

- Women similar to Mary Magdalene whom I would imagine, had similar stories of discrimination and inequity that they could share.
- Women who poured their hopeful energy into designing this artistry—a prophetic masterpiece—that reflects a love for our church; that reflects a powerful story of the past, present and future of Lincoln First.
- In thinking about the stories of what started out to be a hole in the ground Church, I can imagine the stories that existed for this Church in the first couple of panels of this triptych—
- For the Church itself has had some amazing pastors who have laid the foundation for social justice, diversity and more.
- I am certain that there were many highs and some lows in the first two panels—the collapsed roof where no one got hurt I imagine was a low among other things—

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- Nevertheless in **these first couple of panels I am imagining the balconies** filled with sororities and fraternities.
- **I am imagining in these first couple of panels** full Sunday schools for both children and adults.
- **I am imagining in these first couple of panels** swells of music and laughter and friends and fellowship and more.
- Until one day, July 1, 2019 to be exact; Lincoln First would get their first African American woman pastor.
- I was forewarned from my more experienced colleagues to enjoy the honeymoon period that may last for the first year...maybe a year and a half if I was lucky.
- If I am honest—everyone was welcoming....but hindsight— it never felt quite like a honeymoon.
- For we had tragic losses....

- We had financial losses...
- We were vandalized...
- All of this while weathering through a pandemic and countless disaffiliations across the globe....
- Something has changed....
- Something is changing....
- For the aha moment for me of why it never felt like a honeymoon in my leadership here at Lincoln First, is that like Mary in our gospel—I will reiterate from last week....**we as a Church** upon my arrival have not been in the first panel of the triptych anymore....**We as a Church** are not in the second panel of the triptych anymore...
- The sobering realization is that somewhere between (if I had to take a go of it from all of the data and trends that I have studied regarding the rich history of Lincoln First), from about July 1, 2015- today's date of December 10,2023 and

counting....Lincoln First United Methodist Church
has been in the third panel of this triptych.

- **We are here now....**
- Like Mary, at the opening of this tomb—**we are here now**looking for comfort,
- **We are here now**...Looking for Jesus, only to find that he is gone.
- Something has changed.... And I stopped by to proclaim to my feared inconvenient criers and my constipated criers-that it is ok to weep.
- It is ok to cry.
- For it is difficult to live in a culture that may tell us that it is wrong to cry...
- For crying is a natural and often therapeutic emotional response with several benefits such as emotional release, stress reduction, mood improvement and more!

- For the ultimate lesson for us all from this story for such a time as this **to give our selves permission** to cry at what we hoped would be at the tomb.
- **Give ourselves grace to cry** at what may appear to be no more....
- But let us also leave room in the midst of our tears for that one glad morning, when the voice we have always known from the moment we took our first breath speaks to us...
- Lincoln First.... why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"
- The prayer for us as we embark upon an exciting adventure that will lead us back to a place of vitality and more— is that in the midst of our tears, that ultimately represents our fears— we will be able to respond “Teacher... Rabbouni!—show us the way!”

- I invite you to join me in our Advent sermon response.
- **Let this candle be a sign of our peace that we can be restored,**
- our faith restored, our strength restored, our confidence restored, our joy restored,
- **as we watch and wait with all God's people for the promise to be fulfilled.**
- Amen.