

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Personal Meets Political

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 4, 2016

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Luke, 14:25-33.

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?²⁹ For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, ³⁰ saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

This ends our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God.

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Personal Meets Political

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 4, 2016

It's a zinger, that's for sure, this lesson from Jesus. It's one of those moments that you realize you cannot unhear what you just heard – that there is a measured consideration of discipleship – the pros and cons, the costs and consequences – of action and inaction, of following as one of a large crowd just to be in proximity of Jesus or of actually doing the work and living in the way of Jesus.

We are no longer in the land of “warm and fuzzy” theology. This is not one of those comforting, uplifting or even inspiring passages we all love so much. No, that is not what we get today.

So I have had to ask myself many times this week, who's idea was it to open the first Sunday of the Fall lectionary for Christian churches everywhere with this horrible little piece of news? Who thought this might be the way to greet new visitors who have moved into a new house or decided that with the start of the school year they would give church a try again?

You can see my problem. “Welcome back everybody, and especially welcome to all our newcomers today...now on to hating your parents and giving away all of your possessions... thanks for coming, see you next week?” It's a problem.

For one thing, we don't think in these terms anymore. When was the last time you asked yourself “what does it mean to carry my cross?” When did you last ask yourself “how much will it cost me to follow Jesus?”

Last week the story from Luke was about Jesus sharing a meal in the home of a Pharisee. His lesson then was about hospitality – because, when you are indoors, that is the value and moral of the story – to treat others as your guest, to welcome one and all, to be other-focused and authentic in sharing whatever you have.

But this week, well, this week Jesus is out in public. This week the story of “hospitality” has moved from personal into the realm of political. This week the words of Jesus tell us we will have to pick up our cross – that discipleship means bearing the cross.

What does that even mean? When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor gave us an assignment to research the ancient, original Greek texts in the centuries before Jesus to find any previous historic use of “cross-bearing” as a metaphor for discipleship. So I did. It took almost a week to dig through the card file, cross-reference the books and pull and read through the ancient texts on microfiche. And guess what, there are none. Not until Jesus speaking to the crowd on this day was there an idea of “cross-bearing” used in any way other than a prelude to a horrifying actual execution.

So when Jesus uses this idea of cross-bearing, it is shocking to the crowd around him. They have only one picture in mind and that picture leads to death. I mean this is a real downer. And Jesus must be thinking of something else.

When you see someone else carrying a cross, bearing their cross, I think we most often say to ourselves, “There but for the grace of God go I.” It's like a small consolation, a reassuring token of relief, “it could've been me.” Something bad has happened; it could've been me; but thank God it wasn't me.

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Personal Meets Political

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 4, 2016

Whether it is hurricanes ravaging communities on the East Coast and Hawaiian islands, or 60,000 homes destroyed by floods, or a traffic stop gone horribly wrong ending in death, or families whose secrets become scandalous as they are exposed as headlines in newspapers, on and on it goes. In each circumstance, we imagine we could have been standing where those people are now. We might not get hurricanes, but we get earthquakes; we might not get floods but sea levels are rising and climate change is real; we might not be pulled over because of our driving but racial profiling happens; and our family secrets – and every family has them – our family secrets are not yet known by the world but all it takes is a text or a Facebook post picked up by the media and life is not the same. “There but for the grace of God go I.” That’s what we say.

A few weeks ago I was standing in Barnes and Noble looking through the new releases. The aisle was tight and I was facing one side of the shelves while about half way down a woman was facing the other. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a young man in one of those really cool wheelchairs with the low slung back and wheels that seemed oversized and tilted in at the top, headed our direction. He zoomed passed me made a quick maneuver and shot by the woman. He was almost to the end of the aisle when I heard the lady say under her breath, “There but by the grace of God go I.” I’m not sure she even knew she had said it out loud. The wheelchair stopped in its tracks and the young man pivoted around rolling right up to the woman.

“Excuse me ma’am, were you talking to me?” The young man said smiling in a slow southern drawl. The woman looked shocked and embarrassed as she stared down at the man seated in the wheelchair.

“I’m so sorry!” She said. “I meant no disrespect. I was just thinking how hard it must be for you. And how truly grateful I am that I’m not in a wheelchair.” The young man smiled.

“There was a time that I would have agreed with you but not anymore. May I tell you a story?” He asked. He didn’t wait for a reply. “I come from a good upper middle class family. My parents are wonderful and tried their best to raise me right. When I was sixteen I got into smoking pot and drinking. One Friday night, I was driving home after a football game where I spent most of my time under the bleachers with friends smoking dope and boozin’ it up. My folks had given me an old pickup for my sixteenth birthday two weeks before. I passed out at the wheel and flipped the truck. It rolled twice before it stopped upside down. You know what? I walked away. After I got passed my parents being angry it became a cool story with my friends.

Then when I was nineteen, I was driving drunk and high and this time I slammed into a tree. I was driving my very first new car. I was banged up a little but again I walked away.

But the third time is a charm, as they say. It was about a year later and I was still a drunk and doing drugs. I didn’t drive anymore because they had taken my license away. I was riding in the car with my best friend since ninth grade. We were also best party buddies too. He was speeding when we came around a sharp curve and slammed into a concrete bridge rail. In an instant he was dead and I was paralyzed from the waist down.

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Personal Meets Political

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 4, 2016

I was mad at the world. I wouldn't take responsible for anything. I just wanted to get high and forget. This went on for months, but I was in rehab so getting high and drinking just wasn't an option.

One day a black guy named Gus Credo rolled into my room for a visit. I wasn't in the mood but that didn't stop Gus. The first day I refused to talk to him and told him to get out. But he kept coming back day after day. And each time we talked a little bit more. He was in a wheelchair for the same reason. He told me I had a choice. I could let my current circumstance become my handicap or I could let it become my springboard. I thought it was an odd analogy being I could never use a springboard again. I was bitter and angry but Gus just kept working on me.

He showed me that I can still make a difference in someone's life; that I can speak my truth and help other young people who have the same issues I had. And my life is better than it ever was. I am once again close to my family and I and helping others find a new path."

He smiled up at her with a warm caring gaze and in one quick move he spun the wheelchair around. He was almost at the end of the isle when he stopped, turned slightly, and smiled back at both of us.

"I will gladly bear this cross," he said rolling his wheels back and forth with a grin. "Because, here by the GRACE of God I go!" And he shot out of sight.

Wow. I mean, wow.

Discipleship is what happens when we pick up the cross, not because we are choosing death, but because we are indeed choosing life. We are choosing to fight for life. We are choosing to fight for those who are oppressed, for the poor, for the sick and grieving. We are choosing to fight for our children's future that there will be housing and jobs, education and food, well-being and even and maybe especially a community where all are welcome and all can thrive.

Because sometimes, it's not about me and it's not about you. It's about God and it's about living Way of Jesus in the world where all people see love, feel love, experience love and share love. But first, we must pick up our cross.

Amen.