

Third Sunday of Easter April 14 2024

Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Last week, I suggested that our purpose, our reason for being, is to receive the love of God come to us in Jesus Christ and to share that love with others- creating an eco-system of other centered self-giving love. That starts when we accept the pronouncement of who we are that 1 John 3 presents. It is a sign of God's love for us in Jesus that we are God's children. Made so through the love of God poured out over us in baptism, through the power of the Holy Spirit blowing into our lives and transforming us.

This is who we are- what we will be- our future selves- has not yet been revealed/made manifest. We know it will look like Jesus, but the exact shape and form is determined by us and how we live into this reality of our purpose- receiving the love of God in Jesus and sharing that with others- and how we live into our identity as beloved children of God.

The disciples and the early church spent a lot of time figuring out exactly what that future looked like as they pondered the fullness of who Jesus was. But the start was simple. Because Jesus had told them what to do.

They were to be his witnesses. Telling who Jesus was, what mercy he had shown them, and bringing Jesus' message to others. A message of repentance- turning back from the path they had been on. A message of forgiveness of sins- not condemnation, but forgiveness through the grace of God. And that this message was for everyone. They could start local, but it encompassed the whole world.

Peter got the memo. We read in Acts how he starts right after receiving the Holy Spirit on that Pentecost Sunday by simply telling everyone outside, this is who Jesus is. This is the love of God come to us. Receive that love and the freedom from sin, guilt, and death that comes in him. And then let's move forward together to bathe ourselves in that love and to share it with others.

This is what these early believers are. The reality is that they won't know what they will become until later. And there are a number of hits and misses along the way, aren't there. Remember that "perfect" community that shared all things in common so that no one was in want? How long did that last? There were squabbles and arguments.

But, at the core, what they found was that when each follower of Jesus lived out their purpose, in their own unique way, but did so

in fellowship with others- then that community of believers that is the church transformed their own communities, then the Roman Empire, and eventually the world.

Like many of you, I look at our world and it can be depressing. We frequently break the 8th commandment and bear false witness against our neighbors, speaking ill of them, assuming things about them and/or believing lies. We spread fear and anger, not love. We are divided and look to raw power for our safety.

But our Easter celebration and the resurrection of Jesus reminded me of something. We, as followers of Jesus, are a people of hope. And to lose that hope is not being pragmatic, but to lose our trust in the God who has claimed us as children, who has come to us in Jesus, and who has in the death and resurrection of Jesus defeated sin, death, and all the forces that defy God.

There is hope. That we can be freed from the things that bind us. From sin, death, and all the forces that defy God. But that hope needs two components. It needs individuals willing to trust that promise and it needs a community of individuals supporting each other in that promise.

There are so many places that we recognize that something is off in our world. In the priorities that we have, in our relationships.

Jonathan Haidt has authored a new book in which he uses his research to move from correlation to causation in how the arrival of smartphones and the replacement of a play-based childhood with a phone-based childhood has led to the rise in sleep deprivation, loneliness, anxiety, and social awkwardness in our children and youth. He describes how both parents and youth see this problem. Yet, it seems intractable.

Haidt posits four norms to establish to protect our children. No smartphones before High School, no social media before 16, phone-free schools, and prioritizing real-world play and independence.

He shares the story of meeting a mother who sought to follow these norms with her child, but because other parents and even the school system did not follow these same norms, she was concerned her daughter was actually faring worse because she was left out of what her peers were doing. I have had a conversation with a parent who would have preferred their child not have a particular app on their phone, but finally gave in because that is how their sports team was communicating.

The reality is both that we need individuals who are willing to follow the new path, and that this new path will not happen unless there is a community of like-minded individuals. Haidt

talks about this as a “collective action problem”. That true transformation needs that collective group of individuals who all say, “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

That is the church at our best. We are a place and a people of hope. This is the good news of God come to us in Jesus, that the world doesn’t have to be this way. That there is another, better, way to live if we just follow Jesus. If our purpose in life is to receive the love of God in Jesus and spread that to everyone else.

Friends, we are God’s children now. Claimed by God’s love shown to us through the waters of baptism and the incoming of the Holy Spirit. Nothing can take that away. We are also called and equipped to be witnesses for Jesus. To tell and show others that there is another way to live in this world. That it doesn’t have to be this way. To share what Jesus has meant to us.

That we can love those who would set themselves against us. That we can respect the basic image of God in every human being. That we can see what others do in the best possible way. That we can be satisfied with our daily bread and share with others so that they might be fed too. That there is hope and that hope is based on the faithfulness of God to God’s promises.

I am so glad you have come this day to receive the love of God poured out for you in Word- spoken, sung, proclaimed. In the Meal of Christ's own body and blood. In the fellowship of other believers. Bathe yourselves in this love. So that we might go out into this world with hope and bear witness to what we know and who we know.

Jesus, who is God's love for us. And share that love with all whom we meet. So that they, too, might be transformed.

And in so doing, we trust that individually and together, we might bring a glimpse of the reign of God into this world. That ecosystem of other centered, self-sacrificial love. And in so doing, be a beacon of hope in this world. Thanks be to God.