

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost August 30, 2020

Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

First, let me remind you that what we will be talking about today all takes place after the word, therefore.

I love that word, therefore. It is loaded with meaning. Therefore- means that something of importance came before it. A list, a story, a reason that.... For example, I remember growing up my mom telling the story of being at Susquehanna University and talking with her friends and this leather jacket sat down next to her. The man in that leather jacket was my father. They both went to Susquehanna University, he sat down at her table, she didn't chase him away, therefore... I am here.

See how that word works?

Everything we talk about today is what follows a, therefore. What precedes therefore is what both Paul and Jesus have already reminded us. That God so loved the world, so loved us, that God sent God's only Son so that whoever believes in him might not die but have eternal life. God so loved you that God has claimed you through the waters of baptism, made you a new being. And NOTHING that follows can change that love.

Because God so loved us into life, therefore... we live differently than we did before. As Jesus reminds Peter, now we live not with human things in mind, but divine things. We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and live by those rules, not the kingdom of this world.

Now, to do this requires some sacred imagination.

Imagine a world, where there is not vengeance, repaying hurt for hurt, life for life. Imagine a world where politicians do not pit us one against another but focus on differences in policy, carrying the basic understanding that we are all citizens of the United States seeking, striving for what is best for our nation?

Imagine not being told to fear those we might see as enemies- but to love them and to honor them.

Imagine not being burdened by hate- but instead being free to bless those who persecute you. Imagine being emotionally free enough to rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony with others, think only as highly of ourselves as we ought.

What does that feel like to you? Is it freeing? Like a burden has been lifted, “It doesn’t have to be that way?”

Both Paul and Jesus lay out this list of the divine things we set our minds on and that we do because we follow behind Jesus. We go where he goes.

The human way of thinking is what enslaves us, what kills Jesus, what perpetuates the sin in our lives. The human way of thinking is that violence is the path to being safe and exert control. The human way of thinking is striving for vengeance for any perceived wrong. Of dominating your enemy. Of thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. All this leads to is death and more death.

Instead, as followers of Jesus, we set our minds on divine things. Fire up our sacred imagination and love everyone genuinely- without agenda or hypocrisy. As

we know from our own families, that does not mean we always agree or even get along. It is not relationship without conflict, but that love acknowledges that what binds us together is stronger than anything that might seem to separate us. So, the conflict is different- because there is love underneath it and forgiveness that covers it. The divine way of love is hard, but it brings life with it. Life fuller and more abundant than the life we live now.

So why do human things keep slipping into our minds? Because the human way of hatred and fear is easy. It's simple- that person over there will lead to the downfall of all that is good and right in the world. They will destroy what you hold most dear. Do you want to lose these things? Then fear them, hate them! Maybe it is so easy because it appeals to the animal instinct in us. Maybe the ability to love our enemies is the image of God in us. Maybe that is the divine thinking that only we created in God's image can manage- but which has been hampered by sin.

I am sorry to say in a country that has prided itself on saying it is a Christian nation this kind of appeal to hatred and fear works for politicians. It works, it motivates people- quickly, but it is not Christian and is not the way of Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, we cling to what is good- even when it is hard. We strive to outdo one another... in honoring others. Not slandering each other, telling lies, repeating gossip. We rejoice in hope- in the promise of a better tomorrow because God is leading us there. We bless those who persecute and curse us- not returning like for like. Because we look with the eyes of God on a fellow human being created in God's very image and wonder, "What have they suffered, what is going on in their lives that they curse me so?" We are patient in suffering-

knowing that Christ is with us. The Christ who knows something about suffering, who will go to the cross for love of us. We persevere in prayer- knowing that God hears us. We do everything in our power to live peaceably with all people- keeping an 8th commandment attitude. Seeing what others do in the best possible light. We join with all people in laughter, tears, shouts of anguish according to their need.

And it is in the losing of our current life- this life focused on human things, Jesus says, that you will find true life. For when you try and save your life by following the human way, you have already lost it. For that way lies only death.

I must admit that one of the only things keeping me from despair this week is what has taken place in the almost three weeks since the dere(ray)cho. The stories I have witnessed firsthand and through posted stories of neighbors rushing to help neighbors. Of shared food, power, water, shelter. Of people who when our very existence was truly threatened, responded not in fear or selfish disregard of others, but without thought for the political or religious affiliation of their neighbors in need. Without thought for their immigration status or skin color helped them with the essentials of life- food, drink, shelter, love.

In that moment we saw how life taking those other ways of being were and for even a brief moment- things were as they should be. It was the Kingdom of Heaven revealed to us. A glimpse of the divine within an awful experience.

These past few weeks have made me hopeful.

But the immediate need is waning, and I am beginning to see that human way of thinking rising again.

Let us see that kind of thinking for what it is- a stumbling block to our faith. Let us pray for the strength of Jesus to cast it aside even as he did to Peter.

Fifty-seven years ago, in 1963,-the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of a dream of hope and inspiration on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

It was a speech that did not discount a harsh reality- we are after all theologians of the cross- we call a thing what it is. This speech acknowledged the sweltering summer of discontent and protest it took place in. It addressed the need to not allow “creative protest to degenerate into physical violence”.

But what it did best was to dwell in the language and thought of the divine. That the freedom of black and white Americans is bound up together, that we cannot walk alone. We need each other.

And using the sacred imagination God gave him, Martin Luther King Jr. shared the dream given to him. A dream where all were truly treated as equal. A dream where the descendants of enslaved people and slave-owners would sit down at a table of fellowship. Enemies made friends. A dream where people will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

A dream powerful enough to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. A dream come to him through sacred imagination where the Kingdom of Heaven is made real here on earth.

This is the sacred imagination we need now. In the midst of the tumult of life in a pandemic, after a derecho, with the easy words of hate for our political opponents still echoing in our ears, we need that imagination to see a world where all God’s children will join hands and sing-

Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we're free at last.

Free from the sin and death brought on by the thinking of the world. Free to love everyone, without hesitation. Free from all that.

And that song of freedom springs from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. From the hard but rewarding work of following behind him. A song that we sing through our lives and what we do as much as with our mouths. A song of Jesus that we join in harmony with other believers- a song where there is always room for one more. A song where we cover for one another when a sour note comes out. A song that inspires us when we begin to tire. A song filled with sacred imagination made real in the man Jesus- the Son of God.

Listen for that song this week, my friends. Dream dreams inspired by the sacred imagination God has given to us. And join your voice to the chorus as you make choices to love- not hate. To listen more closely. To look more widely. To live more fully into the image of God that resides in us, so that all may have life- abundantly.