

Sermon

“God’s Gifted Flip-Flopper”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 7, 2021

Prayer for Illumination

Lord, in wisdom you have told us that in returning to you and in resting in your grace is our salvation. And yet, we like all our ancestors, tend to run around keeping so busy that we fail to return our attention to you and to your good way.

You ask us, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” because we should know that you are the kind of God who “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

So, for those of us who are prone to forget . . . tell us again of your great love and of its power made manifest in weakness. Help us to see that in love for us you became one of us that we might better know the depth of your love. And help us to take up the mantle as your disciples that we too might “become all things to all people, that [we] might by all means save some — doing it all for the sake of the gospel, so that [we] may share in its blessings.” Amen

*Is. 40:21 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?*

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
22 *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;*
23 *who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

*Is. 40:24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

*Is. 40:25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.*
26 *Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.*

*Is. 40:27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?*
28 *Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*
29 *He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.*
30 *Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;*

31 *but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

1Cor. 9:16 If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

1Cor. 9:19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

- I. This morning I'm going to speak about something that may make you uncomfortable.**
 - A. No - I'm not going to talk to you about your money . . . not today.**
 - B. Nor do I intend to overtly speak to politics . . . though, as always, the message can be applied to that part of life too if you think about it.**
 - C. No, today I want to speak about how we interact**

with those closest too us.

1. Family
 2. Friends
 3. Colleagues in the work-place
 4. Fellow disciples at church
- D. And the question is this, “How do we best help those we know and love to become what they are supposed to be?”

II. That is one way to describe the “calling” to which the apostle Paul alludes.

- A. He is given the task of announcing the “gospel” - the “good news” to everyone.
- B. Paul does this understanding that those to whom he is sent - may not want the good news he is trying to convey.
- C. He *might* attempt to argue them into submission
 1. cartoon on door of seminary friend
“Hi, I’m from such and such a church and I’m here to quote scripture and argue you into submission until you agree with me because God loves you!”
 2. We *all* laughed at that cartoon, because in the South at least, we had *all* experienced exactly that kind of outreach from churches.
 3. Paul *might* have tried to argue his subjects into submission . . . but he wisely chose another way.
- D. He *might* have tried to use the “Scared Straight” Strategy of threatening them with the fires of Hell

and the sufferings of those “left behind.”

- 1. This tactic *is* sometimes found in the Bible but... as early as the 4th century St. Augustine**
- 2. I have known Christians who did what the faith required out of fear of hell or hope of heaven; and I have known Christians who did what faith required out of gratitude to God for all that God has given — and it is obvious that the latter are the more lovely and Christlike people of faith. [this is my paraphrase - PHL]**

III. The apostle shows us in this passage that he takes a very different approach to his work . . .

1Cor. 9:19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

A. He chooses to “accommodate himself” to each person.

- 1. He’s a “flip-flopper.”**
- 2. He’s one of those “lukewarm people who lacks conviction.”**
- 3. He’s someone who doesn’t stick to his talking points.**
- 4. He’s pathetically non-ideological.**

B. Paul seems to understand that these (and probably

even worse) accusations will be made against him

1. But instead of playing to his base
2. He tries to explain the value of reaching out to those “others” who are not yet “on board” with the gospel message.

C. Most of you know my two beautiful sons

1. Both of them agnostic on the question of God
2. God’s little joke on me.
3. But they are like *many* people who are unsure if this crazy talk of God’s love for us could be real.

D. I *could* try to argue them into submission

1. But once again God has a sense of humor and, as it turns out, they are both smarter than me.

E. I *could* threaten them with tales of woe and trouble if they don’t “get on board . . . and *now*”

1. But do I *really* want them to be the sort of Christians who Augustine laments are unlovely and unChristlike? Motivated out of fear rather than gratitude?

IV. I am left with only one weapon in my arsenal — and as it turns out it is the weapon of choice which God uses more often than not . . . Love.

A. I can follow the apostle Paul’s lead and become a philosopher to my philosopher-son; a teacher and care-giver to my care-giving son who works with people having financial struggles.

B. I spent all of 2017 immersed in the writings of Thomas Merton. One stunning thing I

encountered in Merton:

"The Beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them." - No Man Is An Island

- 1. The beginning of love is to meet the other person *where they are* rather than insisting that they join you *where you are!***
 - 2. When I first started Sabbath-keeping "I'll love you better when..."**
My Sabbath day was a day when I loved them on their terms....doing what pleased *them*. Trying to get to know *them* and the things that were exciting to *them*.
 - a. If they were here they would tell you those Sabbath days were the *best days* in the Lang household.**
- C. And this is true for times when those we love are in trouble too.**
- 1. One time in my late teens when I was making bad choices and some in my family were inclined to "write me off"**
 - 2. My beautiful, wise, kind sister came to me and said, "You are blowing this, and it is going to end badly . . . but when that time comes I want you to know that I love you. So call me in the dark hour."**
 - a. There are many reasons to love my sister but I will never forget her love in that moment.**

3. **Last year I read the book A River Runs Through It by Norman MacLean about two boys growing up in a Presbyterian home in Montana in the early 20th century.**
 - a. **beautiful but tragic tale in which the younger son, Paul, develops a drinking and gambling habit that ends in his murder.**
 - b. **The parents are, understandably devastated.**
 - c. **But Norman, the older son, reports that just a few weeks before his own death the father, a Presbyterian pastor, says in his sermon the following:**

“Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question, ‘We are willing to help Lord, but what, if anything, is needed?’ For it is true that we can seldom help those who are closest to us. Either we don’t know what part of ourselves to give or more often than not the part we have to give is unwanted. And so it those we live with and should know who allude us. But we can still love them. We can love completely without complete understanding.”

— *From A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean

- V. **I know that we live in times which are deeply divisive.**
 - A. **We feels these divisions theologically within the church**
 - B. **We feel them in the politics of our nation**
 - C. **We feel them in things as common as the distance which opens up between parents and teens who are**

naturally trying to differentiate themselves from their families.

- D. And “I know that compassion is all out of fashion and anger is all the rage...” but anger and rage are not our best tools for community-building.

VI. Very Soon we will be starting the journey of Lent.

- A. When Jesus was with his disciples at the end of his ministry . . .

- B. He knew what was coming

- C. He could see the writing on the wall

- D. He *could* have raged against them for their upcoming failures...

He *could* have called down fire and destruction upon Jerusalem for the travesty of justice that was about to take his life . . .

He *might* have grasped his identity as God and used it to dominate those around him . . .

- E. But he didn't

- 1. He gave them a commandment to love

- 2. He gave them a Table to remind them of *his love*