

Catch us in our anxious scurrying, Lord,
and enable us to do something about what we see,
something to turn the water of our words into the wine of will and risk,
into the bread of blood and blisters, into the blessedness of deed,
of a cross picked up, a savior followed. Amen. *(Guerrillas of Grace)*

First of all, I want to say in advance
that there are way too many quotes in this sermon.
I wish there weren't but other people have a way of saying things better than I can!

You all are really in luck because
as I was doing some Covid cleaning this week,
sorting through my shelves,
I found my old copy of Garrison Keillor's Pretty Good Joke Book.
For those of you who followed the weekly broadcasts from "Lake Wobegone",
you probably remember the episodes devoted to joke telling –
some good, some not so good and some definitely not pulpit-appropriate!
It's tough to find jokes about Abraham or the cross but I did find one
that had at least a tangential connection to Lent so here it goes:

A drunk went into a Catholic Church to do the Stations of the Cross,
but he did them backwards.
The priest found him looking at the 1st station and crying.
The man said, "I'm just so happy
that he survived and that he's getting his strength back!"

Today's readings circle around the issue of faithfulness.
In Genesis, God speaks to Abraham,
establishing a covenant with him in return for Abraham's commitment to God –
to walk before God and be blameless.
And in Mark, we hear the realities of faithfulness,
the demands it exacts.
Jesus confronts Peter and the disciples with the challenging facts
of what it means to be faithful –
denying themselves, ourselves;
taking up their crosses, taking up our crosses;
and the great paradox of losing our lives so that we might save them.

God isn't just calling out to Abraham and Sarah.
and Jesus isn't just speaking to the disciples.

These words are our words.
These blessings and challenges are all ours.
This is the picture of what it means to be a faithful people,
followers of Christ.
What strikes me about these passages
and the picture of faithfulness they paint
is the great contrast between them
and the way being a Christian is portrayed today.

Let's look at the media.
What are the criteria of Christian discipleship they tend to present?
Obedience? Denying ourselves? Following Jesus? Serving others?
None of those, as far as I've heard, have been mentioned.
No, I think if you did a key word search
the most commonly used words
would be abortion, LGBTQ+, and patriotism.
Looking at the first of those issues,
it seems, as Richard Rohr observed,
that abortion and homosexuality have become one of the litmus tests
for whether you are a faithful Christian or not.
And even more tellingly, as he so cogently observed,
if the Catholic church, in particular,
makes these the critical tests of faithfulness, then the entire hierarchy –
from the Popes to parish priests –
is sinless before God because, at least in theory,
their lives are free of sex and pregnancy.

And as many people have noted, Jesus is silent on both of these issues.
Even Paul mentions only one of them – homosexuality –
and that is always mentioned in a long list
of other sins we could be highlighting.
The definition of what it means to be a Christian
seems to be getting narrower and narrower,
which is tragic because the transforming work of Jesus,
his whole ministry, was not speaking to an ever smaller,
more select group who met some rigid membership criteria.
Jesus went all over Palestine,
in the reading today, he's in Caesarea Philippi,
way up on the northern border, bringing his message to ALL people.

To return to Richard Rohr's comments,
"Jesus is clearly much more concerned about issues of ...
power, prestige, and possessions which are probably 95% of (his) teaching.
We conveniently ignore this 95% to concentrate on a morality
that usually has to do with human embodiment.
That's where people get righteous, judgmental, and upset, for some reason.
The body seems to be where we carry our sense of shame and inferiority...
As Jesus put it, "You ignore the weightier matters of the law—
justice, mercy, and good faith . . .
and instead you strain out gnats and swallow camels" (Mt 23:23-24).
We worry about what people are doing in bed
much more than making sure everybody has a bed to begin with."

And of course, although the media bear some blame,
there are other forces at work.
As hard as it was to watch the violent protest in front of the Capitol on 6 January,
the most jarring image was to see the protesters waving banners
proclaiming Jesus Saves and God Bless America,
as if God were marching with them.
Christianity as a faith has become defined
by such movements as Christian Nationalism
and even the political agenda of some Evangelical churches.
"Christian nationalists believe that the U.S. was founded
as an explicitly Christian nation;
that the country's success is in part a reflection of God's ultimate plan
for the world; ...
that the federal government should ...advocate Christian values...
It (seeks) to create boundaries of group membership around race and the right of
white Americans to segregate themselves from minorities".
(*The New Republic*, 16 July 2020)

How did a faith that leads with the trinity of faith hope and love for all, for all,
for a "multitude of nations" as it says in the reading from Genesis
end up being associated with protesters asserting that
God loves America more than God loves any other nation
and who use violence to impose their views on others,
to the point that even the most basic foundation of our democracy,
our election process, has been called into question.
Christianity has been hijacked.
In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm wrote that

“Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity.

Patriotism is its cult.

By patriotism, I mean that attitude which puts your nation above humanity, above the principles of truth and justice...

Just as love for one individual which excludes the love for others is not love, love for one's country which is not part of one's love for humanity is not love, but idolatrous worship.” (Erich Fromm)

Or as my favorite professor in college, Tony Campolo observed,

“Mixing the church and state is like mixing ice cream with cow manure.

It may not do much to the manure, but it sure messes up the ice cream!”

As Jesus warned in today's reading from Mark,

what good is it to gain the whole world if we lose our soul? (*Jesus for President*)

In the passage from Genesis today,

God calls upon Abraham to be blameless.

We hear that word and think it means sinless or perfect.

But the word in Hebrew means to walk with integrity and truth, to be whole, full, complete.

That wholeness applies not just to us but all people and all creation.

God intends that every living being experience life in all the beauty and wholeness that God is.

God sent Jesus not just to speak the message of wholeness and inclusion but to DO it, to show us the way.

Jesus is our great example and savior.

If we follow his example of welcome and inclusion, we will make God's Kingdom real here and now.

That's our greatest challenge and our highest calling.

What are the verbs of our lives?

Excluding? Narrowing? Judging?

Or opening? Serving, Including, Loving?

