

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
13th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday August 30, 2020

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Tough Love”

Active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with the love in dreams. Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving even of one’s life, provided it does not take long but is soon over, as on stage, and everyone is looking on and praising. Whereas active love is labor and persistence, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science. - *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

1st LESSON: Romans 12:9-21 (NRSV)

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV)

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

“Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

REFLECTION: “Singing It Easy, Singing It Hard”

Listening to Ike and Tina Turner’s rendition of the CCR tune “Proud Mary,” never ceases to thrill us. Tina’s voice, and her short spoken word introduction to the song always stops us, and although Tina has said these words for fifty years, every time she sings ‘Proud Mary’ they are just as riveting now as they were in 1971. There is her voice – mocking, ironic, challenging, arresting. And, there are the words themselves, which are just as unsettling....

Why, every now and then, I think you might like to hear something from us ‘Nice and easy.’ But there’s just one thing. You see we never ever do nothing ‘Nice and easy.’ We always do it ‘Nice and rough.’ So we’re gonna take the beginning of this song and do it easy. Then we’re gonna do the finish rough. This is the way we do “Proud Mary.” And we’re rolling, rolling, rolling on the river. Listen to the story.

And so, Tina sings it for us first, nice and easy. And then, Tina sings it for us a second time, nice and rough. And Tina is right - as an audience, as a culture, we like to hear it nice and easy. But there is just one thing - sometimes nice, has to be rough. Sometimes the rough is what is authentic. Sometimes the song is not an easy one to hear.

I bring up Proud Mary this week, because, just as we like Proud Mary to be nice and easy, and are uncomfortable when Proud Mary is nice and rough, so too do we like our Jesus to be nice and easy. We don’t like our Jesus to be nice and rough. And yet, Jesus is both. Jesus’ love song to us, is nice and easy, and it is also nice and rough. When we get to know Jesus, we realize that Jesus switches between these two seemingly polar opposites and all the spaces in between, effortlessly.

Our scripture today is a prime example of this fluidity. You may remember that last week, when Jesus asked the disciples who they said that he was, Peter seemed to have answered Jesus’ question in a way that Jesus loved. Last week, Jesus was delighted by Peter’s answer, and because of Peter’s answer, Jesus decided to change his name – calling him Cephas, for rock, and assuring Peter that his faith and understanding and love for him would be the foundation of the church that was to come.

And yet, after this ‘nice and easy’ episode, you will notice that our scripture today, following immediately after this beautiful moment, tells us of a nice and rough episode between Peter and Jesus.

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

In just a few words of scripture, that nice and easy assurance between Peter and Jesus has moved to a nice and rough bout of anger, in which the rock becomes equated with Satan. In this part of the story, Jesus’ love for Peter moves from a nice and easy appreciation, to a glimpse of a love which is rough and critical of Peter, accusing him of being a stumbling block and missing the point entirely.

We all want our Jesus nice and easy. We don't want our Jesus saying angrily to us, "Get behind me, Satan." Like Peter, we want our relationship with Jesus to be nice and easy. And yet, so often we get our Jesus nice and rough.

If you think about it, you can probably come up with more than a few instances where the Jesus we encounter in our Bibles is rough. We can all think about portions of scripture in which the Jesus we meet disturbs us, and challenges us, and makes us uncomfortable. There are parts of the story of Jesus that we just avoid. There are the many other occasions, similar to this one, where Jesus rebukes his followers for not getting it. There are Jesus' words to the Canaanite woman which we considered a few weeks ago, in which he calls her a dog – harsh and crude words. There is Jesus' anger in the temple, and his overturning of the tables of the money changers. There is his little apocalypse. His talk about judgement. And then, there is that other bit -- that thing so ghastly -- that our reading today from Matthew points to.

And this episode is so difficult for us, so raw, and so rough, that you may not even realize what I am talking about, as I mention it. We like our Jesus nice, and easy. We don't like him, nice and rough, hanging on the cross.

Indeed, this is precisely why Jesus gets angry with Peter in this story. Because Peter wants it easy. Because the rough is unbearable. Because it makes him uncomfortable.

Every minister has this same conversation in the weeks leading up to Holy Week. A faithful congregant drops into the office, sits down, and after some pleasantries, blurts out angrily, "I don't want to go. I don't want to think about the cross. I can't bear it. There is enough that is terrible in the world already."

As we talk to these people, we discover the deep-seated fear that the comforting hymns and the stained-glass windows which they love can mask so effectively -- Jesus with the children, Jesus calming the storm, Jesus in the garden with us, Jesus holding the lost sheep, Jesus "softly and tenderly calling to us," in our hymns. The Jesus who does not rock the boat.

Every minister wrestles with how to respond to this huge issue in Christology. When I was at seminary, taking Christology, the most cutting edge book on Christology we had to read was a German one. We read books from the North American school – which invariably presented a gentle Jesus. We read books from Latin America which presented Jesus as a man of social justice. We read classic European texts which presented Jesus as God and saviour. But then, there was this big, thick, contemporary German book, and it kept talking about Jesus' apocalyptic vision. And, at the end, it concluded that Jesus was primarily an apocalyptic preacher – that Jesus was primarily a teacher telling us that things will get worse before they get better.

I didn't like that book. No one in class liked it. And yet, holding up that uncomfortable part of Jesus to us, helped us to truly see all of the man who scripture paints for us. It helped us see the real, nuanced, complicated man that Jesus is. It helped us see that this nice man, was easy and also rough.

Every minister wrestles with how to respond to the dichotomy of the Christ story. Sometimes we will err. This year, for instance, as we moved into the pandemic, and darkness did seem to be falling, you may have noticed that the Good Friday service was absent. This year, the bitter cup did seem to be filled to overflowing. "God forbid it," that we might have to drink any more, I decided, like Peter. And maybe I was right. Or maybe I was horribly wrong.

The whole point of the cross is that love sometimes makes us uncomfortable. The song that life and love sings is a melody that embraces all experience.

I met with a woman in her nineties from this congregation earlier this week. We were talking about COVID19. We were talking about how difficult it was. And, she was also telling me about some horrible events in her long life that she had had to deal with. At some point there was a lull in the conversation, and I was uncertain if she wanted to go to those difficult places with me, and uncertain if I could go there with her. But, she looked at me with a smile on her face, and then said to me, "If people think that this COVID is the worst thing that will ever happen, they are wrong. There will be worse things before it is over. If there is anything that life has taught me, it is this. There is always going to be something."

She smiled then. And I felt the tension leave my body. We relaxed. That hard, loving truth, a little like Jesus' apocalyptic messages, when we really face them, make the hard truth somehow bearable.

Jesus came to rock the boat: to love us, yes – to give us the peace that only he can bestow; but also to love us in a way that turns our world upside down, forcing us to confront ourselves and each other, and God.

It is the 'nice and easy,' and the 'nice and rough,' which together make up Jesus' love for us. It is these two together that lie at the heart of the relationship that Jesus offers us.

All that Jesus is asking Peter to do today is to confront the nice and rough part of his story with him. But if we are to be Jesus' friends, if we are to truly love another, we have to be willing to enter into the nice and rough space with Jesus and with each other. Just as the mother with a child with cancer has too. Or, the spouse of someone with dementia. Or, the young person who watches a brother or sister turning to drugs.

This is the genuine real love that Paul is talking about in our reading from Romans today. Not the soft love of dreams. The love of labour and persistence. A love that can truly accompany our beloved. Zealous, ardent in spirit, rejoicing in hope, patient in suffering, persevering in prayer....

This is the way we do "Jesus Proud." And we're rolling, rolling, rolling on the river. Listen to the story. . . .