

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH ~ Scripture & Sermon

Sunday August 2, 2020 ~ 9th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Others”

To die to our neighbours means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.

— Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*

1st LESSON: Romans 9:1-5 (NRSV)

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard [about the death of John the Baptist] he withdrew from [his hometown where he had been preaching] in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

And he said, “Bring them here to me.”

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

REFLECTION: “One and a Thousand”

During my very first week as a minister, a man who set all my alarm bells ringing burst into my office. His voice was loud and abrasive. He wore clothes that looked like they had been slept in. He was large. He was strong. This was all worrisome. But what was perhaps even more alarming was what his never-ending string of words were telling me about him: that he was the evangelical minister from the church across the street, that he was a ‘complementarian’ who did not believe in woman preachers, that there was only one road to salvation as far as he was concerned, and, most worrisome of all, his insistence that LGBT people did not belong anywhere in the church.

I remember that he grabbed me by the hand, and tugged me over into his church across the street, intent on showing me what a ‘real God-fearing church’ looked like. And I remember that,

as he ranted about ‘the doctrine of eternal security,’ which I thought was ludicrous, and we made our way into the church, how strongly the hair on the back of my neck was standing up.

This preacher was nothing like me. He stood way too close for comfort. When he talked he was so close I could see his spit. And his church was nothing like my church. It had a run-down, threadbare feel to it, which scared me. I was disoriented and scared. I wanted to run away, but I stood still instead.

It was then that I saw a crudely made sign above the pulpit at the front, with a little bit of Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* on it, proclaiming, “Salvation is of the Jews.” And those words terrified me even more! What were those words doing there in that church? What did they mean? I just did not understand them. And, it was then that I decided it was time to leave.

What do you do when you meet someone for the first time?

If you are a Mason, you might try out the super-secret handshake and see what happens. If you are a fitness fanatic, you might try to guess their body mass index. If you are single and looking, you might look for a ring. If your faith is important to you, you might look for signs of their faith. You will probably listen to how they talk, assessing their language to gauge their education level, and whether they were born in Canada. Are they taller than you, stronger than you, richer than you, more self-assured than you? Are they your equals, or are they not quite from the same class or socio-economic strata? And, if politics are important to you, you may subtly fish for indications of their leanings.

The things that each of us do when we meet another are as different as each of us. But, the reason that we do each of these things is the same. We take their measure. We size them up. That’s certainly what I was doing when I first met the preacher from across the street.

Immediately when we meet another person, our hippocampus -- that animal brain at the root of our brain stem -- quickly goes into overdrive. It signals warnings. It asks us to determine in a split second, whether the person in front of us is safe. If this person challenges us, it ascertains whether we are strong enough to fight back, whether we need to run away from this person, or, whether this person is similar to us, and safe. It figures out if we can stand in their presence, and nervously proceed, and make the decision to shake hands, hug, or just stiffly nod our head and say, “Pleased to meet you.”

Psychiatrists have determined that in that split second of a first meeting with a stranger, all of us determine whether the other in front of us is a potential mate, a potential ally, someone who might or might not benefit us, or, someone who we need to be careful of.

The other -- strangers -- and the problem with others, is something hard-wired into our souls. Yes, we have a veneer of cultural rules and norms which protect us from facing our deep-seated fear and unease about the other, and yes, this can make us forget all the rapid-fire animal-like things going on when we meet another. But all those things *are* going on, whether we like it or not.

The truth is, we notice the smell of a new person we meet keenly. If they smell different from us, we don’t like it. And, if they look different from us, that troubles us. If they don’t behave in a way that we recognize – for example, by not adhering to our expectation of proper social distance – we are alarmed. And, if they don’t look like us, and we don’t recognize any pattern to how they look – if they are alien to our experience – then alarm bells start to ring.

No matter how enlightened we might be, all of us have had the experience of meeting some improbably looking person – a blue-eyed, ebony-skinned person with bright red hair, say. And, when we meet that unknown person, we need to know – although there is a part of us that, at the

same time, knows we absolutely do not need to know – who their parents were. As my grandmother would say, “We want to know who their people are.”

This hard-wired feature of humanness may have served us well when we were a tribal people. It served the Israelites well, for instance, when they were wandering in the desert, encountering others who saw them as unsafe, and who they saw as unsafe. When we are tribal, that quick way of sizing up another is important. It was a kill or be killed time.

And yet, we no longer live in this type of time. *We do not kill evangelical ministers and their flock in the church across the street from us, no matter how alarming and different they may be from us.*

Even toward the end of our Old Testament, the later prophets were coming to realize that this hard-wired way of judging the other was becoming problematic. The later prophets were coming to see that, yes, there is something in the other that is terrifying. But, they were coming to see as well, that perpetual warfare, and its results – the widow, the orphan and the sojourner, which many now understand to be a reference to the broken men who come home from war, as well as the disposed – were worse, not to mention the loss of life, and the destruction.

Karen Armstrong in her book, *“A History of Violence,”* argues that this dawning realization lies at the heart of all religions. She argues that religion has always been a way not only of defining a group, but also of dealing with the others who are not like us, in healthy life-giving ways. Religion circumvents our tragic gut-reactions, and allows us to embrace another plan of action. It helps us be one, and it helps us be part of the thousands who are not like us.

For example, our readings today show two religious approaches that we can use to deal with our animal brain’s impulses.

Paul’s approach is cerebral. Many people may not realize that Paul’s famous discourse on the importance of the saving action of faith, as opposed to works, takes place in the middle of a longer discourse on what to do with the Jews. Paul, a Jew himself, realizes that his faith in Jesus has changed him, and that he is becoming something different than many of his Jewish brothers and sisters, and this troubles him. He is coming to realize that he is different from them, and that they are different from him. And, all the anxiety about a group of people who are different is rising. The two groups are not getting along. Violence is becoming a very real possibility, and this troubles Paul. “I have great sorrow and anguish in my heart,” he says.

And so, Paul reasons. In our reading today, he wonders. How can I turn against this people, to whom God gave “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah”?

Later in this bit of reasoning Paul will come to the conclusion that “Salvation is of the Jew.”

Reasoning is a great tool for overriding our anxiety. It works for Paul. It is something that we must not ever forget to use. That sign in the evangelical church was there to remind me of this. It helped me realize when I returned to my office, that the preacher who I was so different from had come to see me because, in spite of our different denominations, he loved God, just as the Jews love God, and that this commonality was enough to facilitate a relationship, despite our many differences.

Today, when we are faced with others who frighten us, and certainly, I see signs everywhere that we are becoming increasingly frightened of our friends in the south, we need to use reason. We need to remember that they are our brothers and sisters. We need to remember that people can make mistakes. We need to remember that the virus that is killing them is what we need to

be afraid of, not necessarily them. And, we need to remember that the Republican Party is not evil, per se, but only perhaps the leadership.

The other way of dealing with the other, is, of course, Jesus' way. You will notice that with Jesus, even before he starts to preach his Sermon on the Mount, before he goes to his head, he goes to his heart. And, in going to his heart, he feeds. Our reading says that Jesus looks at those 5000 – at the great crowd of others – when he went ashore, and he had compassion for them.

And, although he has very little, he takes that very little without question, and shares it, and that very little becomes a lot. He seeks relationship in spite of the differences. He crosses the street as my preacher friend did, and seeks to connect in spite of everything that might disconnect us.

In this time of rising hatred, in this time, when people are marching and proclaiming that black lives matter, in this time of COVID when some people follow the rules and others do not, our little hippocampi are going into overdrive. We are sizing up and measuring people more than ever before. “Are they distancing properly? Are they safe?,” we wonder. “Are they a threat?,” we worry.

And yet, should we choose to fight with tooth and nail, we know, as Jesus knew, that the results will be tragic. We can see the tragedy playing out south of the border.

Our knee-jerk way of reacting to the stranger needs to be remembered. It needs to be seen for what it is. And we need to remember that if we are to live, it needs to die.

I think Henri Nouwen was right. He wrote, “To die to our neighbours means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other.”

That hard-wiring needs to be turned off. We need to replace it with critical thinking and love.

Somehow my preacher friend and I were able to do that. We agreed to disagree. We accepted the things we doubted about each other. We chose relationship. Something had to die for us to move forward. And yet, in the friendly bickering and disagreement which resulted, something wonderful was born. For years we celebrated Easter Sunrise service together outside at Mohawk Park, and yet, I know that in our friendship, we celebrated Christ's death and resurrection every day.