

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
29th January 2023 – 4th Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: The Kingdom

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ~*Revelation 22:1-3*

1st LESSON: Micah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

"O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

"Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

2nd LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31 (NRSV)

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

GOSPEL: Matthew 5: 1-12 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

REFLECTION: "Alternating Currents"

In the very first episode of the television series *Mad Men*, viewers watch an advertising agency in the 1960s preparing to meet the owners of Lucky Strike cigarettes. The US Surgeon General's report on the link between cancer and heart disease and a whole slew of other terrible illnesses has just come out, and we find out that *Readers' Digest* has featured condensed versions of the report in its issues. People now know that cigarettes kill. And that is a problem. How can you advertise a product and get people to buy a product that kills?

On the one hand, it seems pretty obvious that you should not be able to. And yet, even so, the advertising company comes up with a successful advertising campaign and people continue to smoke cigarettes. I know a lot about this. My grandmother read *Reader's Digest*. My grandmother was aware of the US Surgeon General's report. I can remember her talking about it. But my grandmother, like many people of the time, continued to smoke.

Tucked into that first episode of *Mad Men*, is a short conversation in which one of the Ad Men remarks that it doesn't really matter if cigarettes kill because there is a part of all humans that loves death. He refers to the great neurologist Dr. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and Freud's work, "*The Pleasure Principle*" in which Freud proposes a theory known today as the death drive. This theory holds that humans have an unconscious love of death, often expressed through behaviours such as aggression, repetitive compulsion, and self-destruction.

In other words, even though there is a part of us that says that we want to live, there is also a part of us, lurking in our sub-conscious, that thirsts to experience violence, catastrophe, and destruction.

Jon Hamm, the lead Ad Man in the television series, believes that this is crazy. He is certain that Freud must be wrong. And yet, the idea actually ends up playing out in the show over its many seasons. The characters may say they want to live, but they find themselves over and over again drifting into relationships, addictions, aggressive and competitive behaviour towards each other, and occasionally, violence. For example, even in the first episode, Jon Hamm's new secretary inexplicably shows up late at night at the door of a creepy male coworker, who has not only insulted her during her first day, but who she knows is going to be married shortly. For some reason this bright young woman chooses a dead end. She chooses a very bad boy.

And this is because, as Freud's theory goes, violence, the death drive, sometimes called "*Thanatos*," exists within each of us, at the same time as another drive – love, or the life instinct, sometimes referred to as '*Eros*' in the literature.

If Freud's theory is true, the human unconsciousness is wired with a kind of alternating electrical current, constantly playing out in a back and forth way, a kind of AC/DC impulse centre, in which these two impulses – life and death - vie for expression in action.

I bring this up, of course, because although it seems crazy, there is no doubt that many of our young people today are caught up in this death impulse, this glorification of violence, and its glamour.

The spate of organized violence in Toronto, carried out often by groups of young girls on the subways and lonely street corners, is horrific, particularly the recent murder of a poor homeless man named Ken Lee by 8 teenage girls. It seems like something new and it is hard to comprehend. How could so many young people,

young people with their whole lives ahead of them, decide to choose the dead end way of death rather than the way of life and love?

Something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong.

And I am not even going to mention the problem of men which we are seeing in our police forces all across North America. Police, it seems, rather than seeking justice and mercy, are instead interested in violence. And black men and women, the poor and the downtrodden seem to be their favoured victims.

In Jesus's time, something was also terribly wrong. Empire and war were everywhere. Violence – especially against women – was common. Roman Triumphs, in which the violence and the plunder of war were extolled and lifted up, were common, the bodies of the captured stripped and forced to walk in ignominy through the crowds to the auction block where they would be sold into slavery. Rebels were crucified brutally. It is said, for instance, that in 4 BC the Roman General Varus lined the road Sepphoris to Galilee with 2000 crucified Jewish rebels. And in Rome, along the Appian Way in 71 BC, just before Jesus was born, it is reported that 6,000 slaves were crucified. And, in our epiphany Gospel Stories, we read of Salome, a young girl, stepdaughter of Herod, who desires the head of John the Baptist, as a gruesome present. Death was everywhere. The love of death was everywhere. Just as, it seems, it is today.

And yet, just as is the case today, the love for life, was also everywhere. Last week, I asked the question – why were so many persuaded so quickly to follow Jesus? And, as I have reflected on this question this week, I can't help but wonder if the reason that so many chose to leave everything and follow Jesus, was that they were sick of living in a society addicted to death and destruction. They wanted to live. And the lives they were living were not living lives. They were lives lived in the shadow of empire and death. Jesus offered them something more.

When people met Jesus, it was almost as if they suddenly woke up to themselves, and realized how cruel and dangerous and violent the world they lived in actually was. And, I think that the words that helped many come back to themselves, were the words that we have read today. The Empire, so desirous of power and control and its perpetuation by violence and fear, which laughed at life, and they saw the poor and downtrodden's insistence that their life could be something more, as foolishness, the foolishness of the cross as Paul puts it, were enchanted by Jesus' message.

Jesus reveals the death wish in our society. And, as Paul says, Jesus shows us that those who live with and live out that wish are perishing. That this road is a dead end. That it is not a way of life. Foolish for those in power, perhaps. But life itself for the rest of us.

The Kingdom of God, the part of ourselves that our souls hunger for, was a revelation to the people who heard Jesus preach. It woke them up. And, The Beatitudes, a central part of Jesus' preaching, makes our unconscious desire for life conscious, and taking our unconscious desire for death, and revealing it for what it is – craziness.

The Kingdom of God is a place where the desire for death and control, and power and lording it over others, and enjoying violence, is turned on its head. When we listen to the beatitudes we are overcome. We start to listen to our better angels. We embrace a way that is love.

Like the prophet Micah, we realize that there is another way. "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?," asks Micah, "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

"Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

No, Micah realizes. Death leads nowhere. Life is what is important. And what the Lord requires of us is to choose life, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Paul also realizes that the common wisdom of the world just leads to more death. And, although the worlds might think us foolish, Paul points out that Jesus' way is so much better, foolish to those who are perishing. He writes that what the world sees as God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and that what the world sees as God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

When we listen to the Beatitudes, we come to ourselves. We heed our better angel. We see the world as God sees it, all of it, not just with the eyes of empire. Let us listen to these words again.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

In the Kingdom of God – the way of Jesus – the world is seen differently. Those who suffer are not losers, who deserve our contempt. Instead, they reveal the horror of Empire and its limits. The Cross, the violence, the grim life people were forced to accept, just reveal this dead end. But there is more. We don't have to accept the violence. The resurrection reveals that it is life that has the power, not the violence.

This is the kingdom. This is what we are working towards. This is what we need to remember in ourselves, in spite of the alternating current operating in our soul. Eros – life – and its power is what we need to focus on. And, it is what we desperately need to teach our children.

The Worldly Kingdom we have built is starting to show its limits. It is revealing its spiritual emptiness. We are discovering that more violence and control does not make us safer. We are learning that it is not only hurting the marginalized, but also the people who maintain it and prop it up.

We need the Kingdom. We need to teach others – in particular – our children how to build it. And we need always, when faced with our impulses, to ask the question – is this life-giving? Is this the way of life? Am I following Jesus?