

2.12.2023 Epiphany 6

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

“God’s servants, working together”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anyone who has ever been called a fool, an idiot, or worse, knows how much such words can, not only hurt, but also over time begin to destroy a sense of personal well-being. Anyone who has ever said such words to someone has also probably seen how such words not only hurt, but can perhaps irreparably damage relationships.

Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reveal that well in advance of our words or actions, the thoughts of our minds reveal the true spiritual state of our hearts. All too often our thoughts reveal our own inner and spiritual struggles of the heart to live as people of faith and love.

The gospel reading for today is difficult. Not only does Jesus talk about murder, adultery, divorce, swearing and oaths, he also reveals the patriarchal assumptions of the world in which he lived. We might say that Jesus’ incarnation so completely assumed our humanity that he (like the writers of the gospels) could not see the patriarchalism of his own age, as we also struggle with structural assumptions of gender, race and culture – matters of the hearts – even today.

In today’s gospel, Jesus begins with a powerful example of someone taking their gift to the altar, while also being estranged from their sister or brother. Jesus’ words remind us that forgiveness is not simply a transactional relationship with God, but rather, forgiveness involves our relationship with our neighbor. According to Jesus, reconciliation with God begins with our reconciliation outward toward our neighbor.

All of today’s readings are meant to remind us that we are at the most profound level created as spiritual beings, and yet our hearts can be profoundly unspiritual. Before we even act upon our words, we become jealous, get angry, quarrel, and speak uncharitably to one another. As Paul writes, *“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?”* As human beings, we have been created and blessed with curiosity and intellect, and yet as modern people, we have been unable to put an end to our human divisions.

Our hearts are meant to be spiritual, and though we say we forgive “from the bottom of our heart,” we continue to harbor grudges. We say we love with all our heart, and yet we can be unfaithful to one another in our hearts. Both Jesus and Paul identified this spiritual sickness of our

hearts with a very unfashionable word – sin – meaning “to be separated from one another and from God.”

There is a sense of urgency to each of the readings today. For example, in Deuteronomy, Moses said to the people, “*See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... Chose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him...*” Choosing a life with God is not something that we can defer to tomorrow, because tomorrow never comes. Choosing life with God always begins today.

Paul also wrote with a sense of urgency to the Corinthians, calling them “spiritual people” who had been acting as infants. The Corinthians could have been using their diverse gifts together as God’s servants, but instead were jealously quarreling in factions with one another.

Both Jesus and Paul’s words reveal that reconciliation of our sinfulness isn’t only about my “personal relationship” with God, rather, reconciliation is really about my personal relationship with my neighbor who always stands before me in God’s place.

The funny thing about people is that we are great rationalizers. Rather than forgiving or seeking forgiveness, we are masters at telling ourselves the reasons why we continue to be angry or jealous, why we are quarreling or why our neighbor’s property or land should be ours. Jesus cuts through our rationalizing and goes straight to the heart of the matter – to the human heart. The source of our every ill is not the sin of our neighbors, but our own impurity of heart that causes us first to abuse, kill or to be unfaithful to loved ones and neighbors over and over in our hearts.

One of the historical figures who made a profound impact upon me while teaching in Japan was a theologian named Uchimura Kanzô (1861-1930). Uchimura lived during a time of great nationalism and war during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1911, reflecting on the state of the human heart, Uchimura wrote an essay titled, “Will peace ever come to this world?” In this essay, Uchimura wrote,

The origin of war is neither political nor economic. The origin of war is moral; indeed, it is spiritual. It is the spirit that caused Cain to kill Abel, and it has been the cause of every war in the world since that time.

Like Jesus, Uchimura diagnosed our spiritual illness as beginning in our hearts. Rather than celebrating God’s blessing of his brother Abel, Cain killed the one who was closest to him, the one he should have celebrated and protected. In doing so, Cain also destroyed his own life.

In today’s readings, Jesus, Paul and Moses speak across time to us with the urgency of eternity

to choose life – to choose the life and well-being of both our hearts and of our neighbor’s life. Until we see that our neighbor’s well-being is tied to our own relationship with God, we will forever begin to first kill and abuse our neighbor in our hearts – never realizing that we are also killing ourselves from within.

“Will peace ever come to this world?” Our very human problems have their origin in the spiritual well-being of our hearts. Years ago, I heard a preacher say,

You think you’re such a sinner that you have to take your Bible everywhere, using like a set of instructions. When are you ever going to learn? If Jesus is in your heart, he will come out of your mouth.

Jesus offers to heal our hearts and every human ill that affects nations, neighbors, families, friends and enemies. In choosing your neighbor’s life, God will save your life.

This is why during worship we confess our sins together, and share Christ’s peace with one another before approaching the table to receive the grace of Christ present in the Eucharist. We need to be reconciled with one another so that we might experience anew God’s reconciling grace in one another.

I am haunted by Uchimura’s question: “Will peace ever come to this world?” Peace and reconciliation have come in Jesus who calls us to be God’s servants, working together with our neighbor for the good of all nations and people.

The way to peace and reconciliation begins in our hearts. Spend time in prayer with him. Remember your neighbor and your enemies in prayer. Soon the prayers of your heart that have upheld your neighbor and your enemy will cause you to uphold them in daily life.

Choose life again today. God’s power to reconcile this world begins with you – it begins in your heart. Amen.