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Where The Rubber Meets The Road

Psalm 146

Mark 12:28-34

Last Tuesday night, people in our community converged on Beth Shalom Synagogue for an hour of worship and prayer and witness. It looked to me like there were well over 600 folks there, and probably 30 or 40 of that crowd were from this congregation. And in that brief hour of solidarity and witness, all three of the lead Rabbi's in Columbia stood on the bema/stage together. We sang – in Hebrew and in English! There were many things that were said. Two have stayed with me.

One of the Rabbis said that the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg had reminded the Jewish people of something that they too easily forget. The Shooter did not say, "I want to kill Reformed Jews, or Conservative Jews or Orthodox Jews." The shooter entered The Tree of Life Synagogue saying, "I want to kill Jews." We are reminded in tragedy that we are one people. And the Rabbis also said that the lesson that the Jewish people have learned well from their own history is that wherever there is hatred against one group of people, that hatred never just stops with one target. Hatred is contagious, indiscriminate and always grows and spreads unless it is checked, challenged and stopped. Hatred allowed against one group will, inevitably, spread to others. And history shows that if any group of people could witness to the reality of the contagion of hatred, it is the Jewish people. It was a powerful experience to be a part of that group, and I am grateful that FLPC was represented there.

And, about a month ago, before all of the horrible events of week before last, I was surprised to have the Muslim Imam Omar Shaheed show up in my office here at Forest Lake. Imam Shaheed serves the Masjid As-Salaam – the mosque that is located on Monticello Road. And it is that Muslim congregation that Tommy Stallings and Don Keever invited to participate with us in the food drive that we have done for the last couple of years each May. We have invited local congregations to fill paper bags with non-perishable food that we have given to Richland School Districts 1 & 2 to allow them to supplement their feeding programs over the summer for hungry children in our neighborhoods. Imam Shaheed said that their congregation was deeply touched to be asked to participate, and that they had never been asked before to do anything like this with any other Christian congregations.

So, Omar Shaheed showed up in my office. And then, he asked me to speak to a banquet that their congregation was holding both as a fundraiser and as an educational event. They had a main speaker, but they wanted me to speak for just a few minutes (a challenge for me in and of itself as you well know!). But what caught my heart and ear was the theme of their event. Their theme for the evening was “Building Model Community Life: Critical Conversations on Racism, Religion and Reconciliation”.

Our Elders and Deacons are – even now – in the process of focusing on four values that – we believe – will help us become more faithful to God’s purposes. And one of the values that we picked was reconciliation! How could I not accept his invitation?! I felt that it was a message from God to me. So, I told him that I would and I told our Session their last meeting that I had accepted the invitation from Imam Shaheed to speak. That event was last night.

And today, I stand before you and read the assigned New Testament Scripture from Mark’s Gospel where Jesus identifies the two most important commandments:

- Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.
- The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

Jesus did not just make these up. Jesus, himself, is quoting Scripture. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. In other words, this commandment to Love God, neighbor and self is as old as God.

Is the irony of all of these things converging lost on anyone?!

Do I need to remind anyone here that Tuesday is election day?

Could the choice, charge and challenge before us be any clearer?

We live in an age and a place that has ready access to hatred, polarization, partisanship and anger. All we have to do is turn on the TV or radio to get that. And that was true even before the horrible events of week before last. And I have wondered if the unity of our nation can sustain the hatred and polarization of the elections this week. I don’t think that I wondered that 10 years ago. But I think about it now. We are not the first generation to feel tension between allegiance to party, class, race, religion or clan and allegiance to God and God’s purposes. But the tension seems much sharper to me now than even a few years ago.

When Dan and I talked to the Elders and Deacons at our Officers’ Retreat in September, I said that the “practice of reconciliation has ALWAYS been at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.” And I quoted 2 Corinthians 5:19: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

The call to reconciliation and the command to love are not new. But the time has come for us to decide if we believe what we say we believe. I told the gathering of the congregation of Masjid As-Salaam that “Christians believe that God’s purpose in sending Jesus Christ into the world was to reconcile the world to God’s own self. But that you would never know that’s what we believe that by watching how we fight with one another and use our faith to wound, dominate and divide.”

Today, this week, you and I have the opportunity to choose. Will we support and participate in God’s purposes of reconciliation and love? Or will we work in the world for the purposes of hate, suspicion, division and fear?

This is where the rubber meets the road. This is our call to decide. Do we believe that God works in the world and calls us to work for love and reconciliation? And if we do, what does that look like? I can tell you what I told the Elders and deacons back in September.

I said that I believe that we live out Christ’s command and God’s purpose of reconciliation by:

- Establishing and abiding by fair conflict practices. We can learn how to fight fairly and how to restrain those who either don’t know or don’t want to fight fairly. We can learn how to move to resolution and reconciliation – it is skill that may be learned, once the heart desires to love and to be reconciled. That is the trick, we have to want to fight fairly and work towards reconciliation more than we want to win or beat someone else before we can learn how.
- We can continue to work on BOTH ministries of MERCY (meeting needs) AND JUSTICE (trying to address the source of those needs). That is one reason that I think we should continue to be active in MORE Justice as a congregation. Everyone doesn’t have to be involved, but some of us do in order to be faithful to Scriptures’ call to both mercy and justice.
- We can work on our ability to see the IMAGE OF GOD in every human being so that we refuse to assume that the “stranger” is always an enemy. Sometimes the stranger is an enemy, but our faith tradition unequivocally requires us to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger! When the good Samaritan stopped to help the man left for dead by the side of the road, the hurt man was an enemy of the Samaritan. He stopped to help an enemy! We do have problems in this country and immigration may in fact put pressure on systems that are stressed. But if we are going to paint immigrants as dangerous and unwelcome, then we are going to have a difficult time reconciling that with Jesus’s definition of the most important two commandments for his followers. The IMAGE OF GOD in every person also includes people in the rival political party from ours. If when you vote this week, you feel anger and hatred surge up in you as you consider the options, then rather than indulging that hatred and anger, consider praying and attempting to give that anger and hatred to God in prayer. Instead of hating or fearing immigrants, I invite us to ask God to give us instead a spirit of peace and love

and to show us how to work for what we believe is right in a way that is consistent with Jesus' command to love.

- Remembering that we are partial and human and that we are not able to see as God sees helps us in our quest to obey Jesus' command. Psalm 146 gives us an unblinking assessment of human plans and agendas. I like the Common English Bible translation: "Don't trust leaders; don't trust any human beings – there's no saving help with them! Their breath leaves them, then they go back to the ground. On that very same day, their plans die too." Friends, NO ONE lives forever. We will all die. Until we acknowledge that we are partial and temporary and seek to know, love and follow the God who is none of those things, we will continue to confuse our opinions and feelings with God's opinions and feelings.

God alone is eternal. God alone is love. God alone is able to reconcile the irreconcilable. God alone is total and true love.

Our choice is what we will serve: The God who is love, who commands us to love, and who came into the world for the purposes of reconciliation, or will we serve our own partial, fearful, temporary egos that encourage us to hate and to wound.

There is so much more that I'd like to say about this. And, I imagine that you may have some things you'd like to say to me as well. You may very well disagree with me and that is ok. I welcome your thoughts. One of the things that I value most about this congregation is that we agree that we do not all have to agree. But what we do commit ourselves to is the practice of listening to each other when we disagree with respect. I pledge to do the best I can to listen to your thoughts and opinions. This is not easy. But, both today and this week as we live our everyday lives, AND when we die – for we will all die one day – my commitment to you is that I want to do everything in my power to help us all to be – in Jesus' words – "not far from the kingdom of God."

May it be so right here, right now.