

Sermon Getting Well

Pastor Eric has been on preaching a series on Christian Pluralism. When he and I sat down to plan for this series, I was challenged to contribute to the series by preaching on Christian Pluralism or to take a pass. It's an interesting challenge, because I would like to think that in the 9 years I have been at this church, I have been preaching the values that contribute toward an acceptance of God's love that is pluralistic. I would like to think that I have moved people from the very rigid posture of "either or" to the more welcoming and flexible posture of "both and."

So, I'm not sure if I've written a sermon on Christian Pluralism, but I think it definitely contributes toward the conversation. Please pray with me

May the words from my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer Amen. Grace and peace be with you on this day.

I don't know about you, but the ongoing military crisis in Gaza has cast a dark shadow on my days. I can't stop thinking about the Palestinians I know, the relationships I have built, and the land I walked on. The disappointment I feel borders on rage and grief, and the only way I can cope is by pushing it aside, allowing it to be as distant in my heart as it is geographically. No matter from which side you look at this conflict, it is obvious that many wrongs have been committed over the last 75 years, and very few things have been done right. Wrongs are being committed on top of wrongs, making it almost impossible to unravel and make sense. How do you forge peace when the parties involved are holding on to the wrongs that have been committed?

It's not only the lack of virtue that stands out, but also the unwillingness to listen and recognize that possibly the other side has a legitimate complaint. PAUSE

At a recent birthday party, I was in the company of several people who grew up in Philadelphia. I asked them the million-dollar question: who makes the best Philly cheese steak? Was it Pat, or was it Gino's? Do you use cheese whiz, or provolone? Does the best Philly cheese steak have peppers and onions, or mushrooms? Man, it got them going. It's a hot subject for native Philadelphians. I was told about a famous brawl on the south side of Philly between the different vendors and their supporters. Bones were broken, heads were cracked.

The sporting arena is another favorite for people to argue about. Which team is better? Which player is the best? For many of us it's just fun, but for some people it's serious business. They'll fight you over it.

My mother does the same thing with doctors. Her doctors are always the best. God forbid I should see a doctor who is obviously too young to be any good.

This is called exclusionary thinking. It may seem harmless to boast about your doctor or cheese steak, but exclusionary thinking leads to a certain form of bullying: My way is the only way. My way is superior to yours, and if you don't agree then there's something wrong with you.

Intolerance only breeds division, which eventually leads to violence. Think about the conflicts between Catholic Irish and Protestant British, Sunni Muslim and Shiite Muslim,

Israel and Palestine, Republican and Democrat. They all stem from non-tolerance, which leads to dominance at the expense of someone else. This does not fit with our image of a loving and welcoming God.

So, how can we, the church, counter this sinful tendency of humanity? How can we use the scriptures to promote a way that leads to a greater acceptance of all people, regardless of who they are or where they might be on life's journey? It's in today's reading from the Gospel of John when Jesus visited the pools of Bethesda and healed a paralytic man. We could focus on the miracle, but the lesson we need to learn is not in the miracle itself. Instead, I want to focus on how Jesus performed the miracle.

I really like what Pastor Eric said in his sermon: the goal is not to become Christian but rather to become Christ-like. I cannot perform miracles and heal the cripples of Pinellas County, but I can walk in the path of Jesus and seek to become Christ-like. In order to do that I focus not only on what Jesus did but also on how he did it.

Let's unpack it this passage. What's the first thing that Jesus did?

1. He saw. He noticed. He recognized the pain and then approached the man.

Author, filmmaker and musician, M.K. Asante wrote: "When you make an observation you have an obligation." How many of see and then pretend to not have seen. Let me look away, because I can't just deal with this now.

2. Jesus looked beyond the differences. He didn't stop to consider if this man was worthy. He didn't ask to what tribe he belonged, where his parents were from. He only saw a human. Are we able to do the same?

Can we see beyond a person's tattoos, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and nationality? Is one of us, or is he one of those other people? Is he a Mexican who came here to take my job or is he a descendant of the Mayflower? Is he Palestinian or Israeli?

3. Jesus walked up to the paralytic and asked, "Do you want to get well?"

What does this question teach us? Jesus is the Son of God. Does he really need to ask for permission? Yes, he does. Because we all have free will. Respect boundaries and not assume your act of kindness is the only way. Think about the number of people who meddle in the lives of others, with good intentions, but then create bigger problems.

The continent of Africa is riddled with failed infra-structure projects that were started by well-intentioned missionaries, who never took the time to look at the boundaries.

4. Jesus listened, and I might add that he listened patiently.

It was a question that required a simple answer, "yes or no." Instead, the paralytic went into a long discourse, explaining why he couldn't be healed. I bet you anything the paralytic rambled on and on, incoherently, but because paper was very expensive back then, the gospel writer decided to keep it short.

Listening, a basic virtue that too many of don't want to exercise. But think about how good it feels when someone keeps quiet, focuses on us, and listens to our pain, despite how incoherent our ramble may be. It's no surprise to me that Jesus would also be a good listener.

5. Jesus discerned.

Jesus looked at this man, listened to his rambling narrative and discerned his soul was in jeopardy. The miracle was not about walking, at least not entirely. It was about believing in God. Being paralyzed on the side of the pool for so many years had done something to this man's soul. He no longer had hope and he no longer believed. Healing his legs would get the paralytic to walk, very important, but more importantly, it would open his eyes, heart, life and lead him to believe.

6. Jesus acted.

He could've walked away. He could've gotten lost in the incoherent ramblings of the man, but something was at stake here. So, he unfroze the legs of the man and told him to walk. Get up, pick up your mat, and walk. How Christ like of him.

Why was this cripple on the side of the pool paralyzed? We don't know and by this point it no longer matters. To be Christ-like is to recognize that all the talk is paralyzing. It puts our soul in jeopardy. What matters is life from this day forward. Get up, pick up your mat, and walk.

At a personal level, I can connect with the paralytic on the side of the pool. I think many of us do. How many of us are unable to move on, holding on to how we have been wronged, lamenting events of the past. The inability to let go, is paralyzing. But I want to be more than just a Christian. I want to be Christ-like. Which means that I have to let go. It's not worth my soul. Get up Guillermo, pick up your mat, your possessions, your life, and walk.

At a geo-political level, the conflict in Gaza is the paralytic on the side of the pool. Both sides have been paralyzed by the anger. They have long rambling discourses about how they have been wronged. They have long rambling discourses as to why they have been unable to live in peace. Too much talk, and none of it leads to peace.

To be Christ-like is to realize that after 75 years of war, there has to be a different way, one that could lead to peace. That my friends is the way of Jesus.

On this day, Jesus is looking at us and asking, "Do you want to be well?"

Put aside the long argument. It's a simple yes or no. Do you want to be well?

Amen.