

LIVING GENEROUSLY
Psalm 148 – John 13:31-35
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 28, 2013

Ever since Easter morning, the sermons have been focused on the meaning of the final charge to the congregation given every week beginning with the words:

“Go out to the lost, confused people in your neighborhood and tell them God’s Kingdom is here... Bring health to the sick, touch the untouchables... raise the dead...”

We Christians have been given a sacred responsibility, to become, as much as humanly possible, like Jesus, who spent himself throughout his ministry loving and serving others.

This call to action is quickly followed up with the Benediction, literally the Last Word, giving God’s blessing which makes it possible to keep this charge given us.

At this point I need to clarify something. Identifying our neighbors as “lost and confused” isn’t meant to be a put down. Truth be told, all of us are lost and confused, lacking purpose and direction until finally securing the guidance of Christ, our fixed North Star, leading us into the Kingdom of God. Notice I didn’t say the Kingdom of Heaven. That, in God’s time, comes later. Our immediate concern is to become actively involved in the emerging Kingdom here on earth, reclaiming, reconciling and restoring the creation, and everyone in, it back to God.

The theme of today’s sermon is “living generously” taken from still another phrase in the charge, “You’ve been given generously, so live generously.” In other words God has adequately proven himself to be generous with us. How? Our sins are forgiven and we’ve become his adopted children, members of his family empowered to love if only because Christ loved us first, even when we fail him.

On the night he was betrayed, while in the Upper Room Jesus gave last minute instructions to his disciples saying,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Another way of saying it, “you’ve been given generously so now live generously.” In other words, don’t keep God’s love all to yourself, share it as fast as you can otherwise it will mutate into a deadly strain of narcissism, making you so excessively preoccupied with yourself you’ll have nothing left over for others.

It seems odd being commanded to love. Isn’t love something that bubbles up from within naturally? Not always. True, it’s easy to love those you want to love. Or is it? Sometimes you don’t feel like loving the significant others in your life. Your love freezes over when you’ve been hurt, or even worse, betrayed. That’s when love doesn’t

come naturally but it can come supernaturally if you make the decision to love the other even despite the hurts and betrayals; still, loving isn't always easy. Keeping love alive takes work and commitment, determination and grit.

To illustrate this, let's recreate the scene in the Upper Room by first contrasting the negativity of the twelve disciples with Jesus' calm and peaceful mood. They came to celebrate the Passover, but not unlike some family get togethers on special occasions, there were petty, unresolved issues between them. What's more, ever since Jesus started talking about handing himself over to be crucified, the disciples weren't entirely enthusiastic about being with him either. On top of that the rifts between the disciples festered and metastasized the more they bickered over who was the indispensable man in God's Kingdom. So, what was supposed to be an intimate celebration became an ordeal to be endured.

It started out on the wrong foot the minute they trooped through the door, intentionally ignoring the foot washing basin nearby. Usually the lowest servant in the house was charged with the responsibility of washing the dirt and grime off guests' feet. It wasn't just a sign of hospitality, it was an act of humility, but in this case how could any of the self-proclaimed "greatest in the kingdom of heaven" be expected to wash one of his rival's feet?

Sensing the ugly mood around the table Jesus took matters into his own hands. Even though he probably disliked them at that moment, Jesus decided to love them anyway by washing their feet. Each one had to be totally embarrassed and even ashamed by Jesus' act of self-humiliation. Peter especially, because he tried to stop Jesus. When Jesus responded by saying, "Peter, if you refuse me you have no part of me," Peter tried to save face, dramatically gushing, "Then wash my whole body." Ignoring Peter's obvious theatrics, Jesus continued to wash his feet and when he was done sat down and said his peace.

"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet...I tell you servants are not greater than their masters... If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (John 13:12-18)

Once again Jesus pulled them all back to the better way. You love not just when it's convenient, but on command. What's more, real love isn't based on feelings, but obedience. The highest love is demonstrated by doing something good for the other when it's least expected because it's already been done to you.

We've already established God is a wonderful and generous giver with Jesus being the personification of God. Throughout the sacred story in the Bible, from its beginning until now, God always shows himself to be loving and forgiving, especially through his Son, who came into the world to demonstrate amazing grace and love, even though we didn't deserve it. And yet, just admitting it's not deserved reveals the best of our humanity, with the caveat being once we acknowledge our hubris we can see ourselves not only as we really are, but by the grace of God, who we can become.

All these things I've just mentioned were experienced by the Twelve after bungling their way through Good Friday, then seeing the Risen Christ on Easter morning

and last but not least, experiencing the power the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Without realizing it, the moment Peter and the others accepted Jesus' invitation to "Follow me" they went on the roller coaster rides of their lives, going up and down, experiencing both sporadic growth spurts balanced out by equally sporadic back sliding.

And yet, the historical record shows they were responsible for starting a chain reaction that continues today, 2,000 years later. How can anyone explain it without acknowledging what the Biblical record has shown time and again, God takes the weakest, most unlikely characters to change the world one life at a time?

Let's now fast forward to this time and place to be precise, today, April 28, 2013, in the Babcock Presbyterian Church, located smack in the middle of Loch Raven Village in Baltimore, MD.

Up until now, this sermon has been mostly about looking backward. Now it's time to look forward but not without acknowledging the disciples' transition from being among the lost and confused into becoming Christ's first responders to the lost and confused in their neighborhoods.

You may be wondering, "When will Harry stop badgering me about reaching out to others and get back to preaching about how much God loves me and wants me someday to with him in heaven?" You may also be thinking, "Harry's asking too much of me," but in my own defense I'd have to object and say, "It's not me asking you to lay down your life for your friends. I'm only the messenger. It's really Jesus who's getting under your skin.

Long ago the Prophet Micah declared, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 5:8)

If you're feeling like the world is passing you by and you're sensing you're missing out when you see others experiencing joy and satisfaction and you're not, even though you worship God on Sunday and maybe even attend a Bible study on Wednesday, then maybe it's God's way of saying, "It's time for you to do something different. Put yourself out there and help someone who needs you.

This sermon is almost done but between its end and the final Charge and Benediction, we'll pray for the world in general and certain people in particular then we'll take up the offering and pray it will be spent wisely.

But this Sunday at the end of the service, before the Charge and Benediction, you'll also hear a Minute for Mission. Cathy Lawson will talk about specific steps we hope will help and encourage you to live generously for Christ and others as members of our beloved Babcock Presbyterian Church.

God bless and love you all.