

“Courage”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 23, 2019

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:13-18

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 26:36-46

You’ve witnessed this, I’m sure; after some natural disaster – a fire, flood or tornado, for instance – those impacted are interviewed by television reporters. One shows obvious signs of rage, fear and confusion; he places blame upon the government, the first responders, someone, anyone. This anger arises from not being able to make sense of the unpredictability and fragility of life. But the next person interviewed expresses gratitude for what she has been given in the past and is confident that she will be taken care of in the future. Her faith may be in God, or in her community, or some combination of both; she is able to see what has unexpectedly happened with different eyes than her angry neighbor.¹

In today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, we see – in stark contrast – the difference between Jesus and his disciples at a time of trial. When he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus encourages his disciples to stay awake while he prays; and in doing so, we are aware that he means more than just fighting off sleep: staying awake means staying alert; being prepared to endure even in the dark hours before the light comes. But while Jesus prays, his disciples sleep; while Jesus is confronting and resisting a temptation from within to veer from the course he must take, the disciples cannot even stay awake. And so, when the hour of their own testing comes, they run away from Jesus, deny knowing him, and hide in fear.

And yet, even though Jesus will go to the cross, the tomb cannot hold him. And even though his disciples have acted out of cowardice and fear, Jesus does not blame or condemn them. Instead, he appears to them, empowers them, and commissions them to go and be witnesses of God’s merciful love to the ends of the earth. *Though we were sinners, John’s gospel teaches us, God sent his Son not to condemn to world, but to save it.*

During this summer’s preaching series, we are taking a look at the spiritual teachings that stand behind the Twelve Steps of recovery programs such as

¹ Recounted by Philip Z, *A Skeptic’s Guide to 12 Steps*

Alcoholics Anonymous. In doing so, we are looking not only at our actions, but also our ways of thinking and believing. And so, we are testing Richard Rohr's claim that recovery is a modern-day way to talk about the biblical principle of salvation: that we can and will be saved through the ways that our behaving, thinking and believing change.

Step Four in the recovery process is: "made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." Terence Gorski says that searching – taking a deep look at what is inside of us – is like shining a light in a cave, because you never know what scary things you might find there.² While our faith tradition uses the language of sin, recovery programs call these character defects – those ways of acting, thinking and believing that create ongoing suffering to the self or others. It is only through searching – honestly and thoroughly – that these character defects will come to the surface in order to be recognized and addressed.

And so, in this way, the inventory created in Step Four is moral scrutiny; not to discover how good or bad you might be and regain some moral high ground, but in the sense that it seeks to answer questions such as: "Are my actions making me stronger or weaker?" "Is this current way of life good for me or bad for me?" "Is it helping me or hurting me?" "Is it helping people I love or hurting them?"

Step Four offers the opportunity in the process of recovery to stop blaming others and take responsibility for our actions and their consequences; to discover those parts of us that we often try to cover up or deny. Richard Rohr calls this "shadow boxing" because it is only when the light shines that we can see the shadows that lie within us. These lingering angers, fears, or resentments could be the result of something that that happened to us or in us long ago. As Rohr says, "The internalizing voices of a demanding parent, a rigid culture, or a finger-waving church persist long after the parent is gone, we move to a different place, or leave the church."³

Whether it manifests itself in an addiction or not, all of us have these shadow sides. The more we deny that they exist, the more we have to work to keep our feelings suppressed; but in times of stress or crisis, they are bound to come out. Sometimes, they emerge as feelings of superiority (believing that you are better than others) and other times as self-pity (thinking that you are worse than others); and often – as addicts experience – we swing back and forth between these two

² Terence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*

³ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

extremes. Think back to that first disaster victim; he was angry at not being treated exceptionally – as superior to others affected – while at the same time expressing self-pity and helplessness – even when others were present and looking to be of assistance.

And so, this moral inventory must not only be searching, but also fearless. In the same way that Jesus fearlessly confronts his shadow side – the one telling him to stay with his friends rather than accepting God’s will for him – so those in recovery programs who are seeking the truth about themselves must make an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses; both of themselves and their situation. Rather than denying that we have any weaknesses or vulnerable points, we must reconcile them with who we are and were created to be.

This seeing and naming of our faults may be a gift to us, but it may even more be a gift to those around us; making it easier for others to love and accept us. Jesus asks, *why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?* (Matthew 7:3) Should we not first take the log out of own eye? But how easy it is to criticize others when we are not willing to be critical of ourselves. Step Four provides an opportunity to be searching and fearless not in the way we judge others, but in how we look at own ways of acting, thinking and believing. It helps us to see our own log first, so that we can stop the blaming, accusing, and denying that displaces our problem somewhere or onto someone else.

In our own Christian tradition, we have rituals to help us to engage in this process of self-reflection; and yet in many churches today, confession is seen not only as uncomfortable, but as a private matter. This means that those attending a worship service that does not include a time of corporate and public confession are not likely to engage in repentance and on their own. But, if we are honest, many of us who do confess publicly are still reluctant to undertake the kind of honest and fearless inventory that Step Four dictates. Maybe this is because we feel that more than enough judgmentalism already exists in our world – we just don’t want any more of it.

But the reality is that whether you call it character defects or sin, “evil succeeds only by disguising itself as good, necessary or helpful.”⁴ None of us are trying to do wrong, but the fact that we can do cruel, stupid and destructive things

⁴ Rohr

shows that we are unconscious and unaware of some part of our shadow side. Thus, if we are not searching, if we are not asking the moral questions of helping or hurting, then we leave ourselves open to evil thoughts, beliefs and actions; whether we fully realize it or not.

And yet, in God's wisdom, evil is not directly destroyed; instead God brings us, often through our failures, from unconsciousness to deeper consciousness. In this way, we develop the ability for compassion and conscience. Instead of denying the issue, or reverting back to our defaults of superiority or self-pity, we come closer to the place where Jesus arrives after his time of trial in Gethsemane; responding to God with the same words that he taught his disciples to pray: *thy will be done*.

Think once more about the second of the disaster victims interviewed on television. She was thankful for what she had, understanding that all things come from God, but holding them lightly enough to not blame or feel bitter when they pass away. Instead, what is most important is her faith and courage in the face of adversity; and her hope that, as God and her community have blessed her in the past, she will be taken care of in the days to come.

Ultimately, her hope is in recovery: that the resources – both material and spiritual – for salvation exist; and that it can be hers. That is the promise that Jesus, who rose to new life, also gives to his disciples – that because he lives, they might also have life, and life in its fullness. All thanks be to God. AMEN.