

“God of the Living”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 15, 2020

Third Sunday of Lent

Psalm 86:8-13

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 12:13-27

We have been working our way through the seven marks of vital congregations – looking at one mark each week, doing so in order – and have now reached the sixth mark, or signpost on the journey, Caring Relationships. We do so at this strange and unfamiliar moment, when we are being asked to consider what it means to be in relationship with one another while at the same time keeping apart from each other, at least to some degree. This is a question not only that our government and public health professionals are asking, but that churches are also grappling with. How do we show love for one another and also respect the need to stay separate; to greet and interact with each other while limiting familiar expressions of care: shaking hands, sharing hugs, and standing close?

Old habits sometimes die hard, and even good habits such as these common expressions of love will need to be re-examined, at least for the time being. As Christians, called to love one another, we are faced with this challenge to re-imagine the ways that we show that love for the sake of the common good. It could very well be a matter of life and death.

Yesterday, I watched a video chat between my professor at Dubuque Seminary and a classmate/colleague, Austin, who is Pastor of Redmond Presbyterian Church, located in the Seattle area, just six miles away from the nursing home that is considered ground zero for the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. Austin spoke about the many times he has visited members of his church at this care facility, and how his congregation and its leaders are re-examining how they are called to love one another, both within the church and the wider community. In addition to decisions about how to interact with each other – safely and lovingly – they are also considering how to best care for those who have been impacted by the disease: family members and health care workers, children not attending school and the elderly who are most vulnerable. They are grappling with how to deal with anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation. How they can live out love for one another when the stakes are so high?

The realization is sinking in that we will soon – if not already – be facing the same type of challenges. Our government and public health officials are telling us to expect that, while things are not as dire here yet, the time is coming soon. How do we act as good and faithful members of the public while at the same time loving one another as good and faithful sisters and brothers in Christ? While these are not always the same, they are certainly related.

In the opening verses of this morning's reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus is approached by the religious people of his day about a question concerning public and religious duty. Their motives may not have been pure, for we are told plainly that they are attempting to entrap Jesus, to get him to say something incriminating. If he answers that the taxes are lawful, he will offend the Pharisees and others in the crowd who detest the empire's meddling, not to mention the poor who are especially burdened by such a 'flat tax.' On the other hand, if he speaks out against the tax, it won't take long for Roman loyalists to report him to the powers that be. It is a well-laid trap, and all the more so because it is prefaced by a flattering reminder that Jesus' reputation is for fearless truth-telling, not political maneuvering.¹

Some hear in Jesus' words – "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" – a declaration of the importance of civic engagement; others an urge of loyalty to the Kingdom of God. We owe to the state that which is demanded of us; in this case, a coin with Caesar's image imprinted on it. But what belongs to God is the image that has been imprinted on each of us, which is the likeness of the almighty. We are called to honor God with all that we have and all that we are.

Because we bear God's likeness, we are to act like God; not lording authority over others for self-gain, but rather like the One who creates, nurtures, sustains, redeems and saves us – no matter the cost. We are called to serve as God's partners, God's co-workers, exercising all of the power and dominion given to us in stewardship of the abundant life God wishes for all.²

So, Jesus is not talking here about different domains of loyalty – as if we have obligations that belong exclusively to the state or to our faith. Our love for one another is at the same time for the sake of the common good and for purpose of the good news. Thus, when a governor or a school board or a public health official directs us to change the way we interact with one another, it is our

¹ Lance Pape, from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² David Lose, "Image, Likeness, and Identity"

responsibility to take their direction seriously as we discern what it means to the way we live out our lives as the people of God. Jesus says that we cannot serve two masters; thus, we must always consider the multiple ways that God might be speaking to us.

After today's church service, the session will be gathering to consider what changes may be necessary for us to undertake going forward in light of the information we have from those multiple sources. Given this present situation, it might – for a while – be more difficult for us to love one another in the same manner that God, through Jesus, revealed love to us. It might mean that we have to be more vigilant checking in with those whose health is vulnerable and cannot be out in public. They might need food or medicine delivered; they might need a phone call to maintain emotional health. The shelves of food banks might need to be restocked. First responders and health care workers might need extra care and attention. In times and situations like these, how are we called to love one another?

The latter section of today's scripture reading might seem strange at first. We're not told this time whether the questioners were out to trap Jesus, but it does seem odd that the Sadducees – those who did not believe in the resurrection – were the ones asking Jesus about it. The law they referenced – called levirate marriage – comes from Deuteronomy and sought to ensure the preservation of one's family name by stipulating that a man should marry the childless widow of his brother. Their question is hypothetical, meant to take an ancient practice to the extreme in order to show that the whole idea of the resurrection was foolish.³

Jesus says that in the kingdom of heaven that is to come, this patriarchal tradition – intended to protect women who would otherwise be left vulnerable – and, indeed, the whole institution of marriage will be unnecessary. Instead, in the resurrection, the dead will rise to be like angels; thus, there is no need for women to be passed along like property. Resurrection is not foolish, only this preposterous question about it.

But, as silly as this whole encounter might seem, it does raise interesting questions. Such as: what will resurrection be like? How much will life in heaven be like life on earth? And what will our relationships be? This passage gives few specific answers to these questions, though it does stress that we should not limit our imagination – let alone God's design – for life after death by our own

³ Richard Swanson, from *WorkingPreacher.com*

experiences. Whatever it will be, eternal life is sure to be qualitatively different from what we know now in our temporal existence.

So, will we recognize our loved ones in heaven? Will they still be our parents, siblings, children or friends? Again, Jesus does not affirmatively address this question, he does not say that we will not know our loved ones in the afterlife. But what he does say is that life then will not be bound by the limits of life now. God is still the God of those who have passed on from this life and so we can only imagine that they have an even fuller, greater understanding of relationships than do we.

And so, key to this passage is the relationship between God and life; for “God is a God of the living.” And if so, then followers of Jesus ought to be focusing on those things that bring us life; and life to those that we are called to love. In this particular time and situation, that might mean that we discover and discern new applications for the energy, imagination, intelligence and love that is required for truly caring relationships.

Yes, sometimes our old habits die hard. Often, there is a good reason for that: because we stand in a faith tradition that has long valued the importance of caring relationships and the power of direct touch. Today, we are called to adopt new ways to reach out and be in contact; to re-examine what it means to be the gathered and sent people of God. Today, our particular call to love one another rings even louder than before; indeed, our God is doing a new thing, can we perceive it? Amen.