

“From the Heart”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 26, 2020

3rd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

Rev. John Wahl

I Peter 1:13-25

“What can we do?” This is a question that I have been both hearing from others and asking myself during these now nearly six weeks that we have been living with the changed reality of social distancing. It reflects a genuine desire to help: to play some part in what have become community-wide, state-wide, national, and international efforts to minimize the spread of this virus and protect the vulnerable in our population, as well as a health-care system under threat of being stretched to the point of breaking.

During this trying time, we are witnessing amazing examples of people who are putting the collective *we* ahead of the individual *me*. From volunteers making masks at home to face-shields at schools, from families giving to food banks to neighbors putting on porch concerts. From front-line and health care workers who are being thanked through donated meals to spontaneous rounds of applause.

We are doing these things because there is suffering among us and – though we too often fail to act on the reality – when anyone among us is hurting, none of us are fully well. Thus, we are compelled wonder what it is we can do – whether that is through large acts or small. For Christians, being loved by God is the empowering action that enables us to love our neighbor. Through the living sacrifice of our lives for our neighbors we become who we are meant to be as God’s beloved children.

Last Sunday, we looked at the opening verses of I Peter which focused on having a living hope through Christ. As resident aliens, living in a foreign land, the Christians addressed in this letter were called to endure their current persecutions and maintain a hope that better times were coming; that their present sacrifices were preparing them for the coming joy of salvation. Like gold that is refined by fire, their faith was being tested and purified.

You may have noticed that today’s reading began with the word “therefore”. Any time a sentence begins this way, we have to wonder what came before; in this case, it was the hearing of the good news; the foundation of their living hope. “Therefore,” they are instructed, “prepare your minds for action, discipline yourselves.” Literally, this phrase reads: *gird the loins of your mind, be sober.*¹ Let’s take these two different instructions in order.

Almost any time that the bible uses the term “gird the loins,” it is a reference to the Exodus, when the people of Israel were warned to be prepared to leave Egypt when the time was right; that God would give them safe passage. Thus, the call to “gird the loins of your mind” would mean that the Christian community should be ready to embrace the joy of salvation when the time of testing had come to its conclusion. For us today, this might mean that as much as we might not like the fact that we cannot physically gather – as extended families, with friends and neighbors, as the church community – we must patiently keep ourselves ready for when the time comes it is safe to do so again: by maintaining the bonds of those relationships, by continuing to support and encourage one another, especially those most vulnerable to present trials such as hunger, depression, loneliness, or exhaustion.

For some of us, the instruction to “be sober” has very personal implications; and we know that during any time of great disruption, there is a greater chance that we might fall into destructive habits or states of mind. As we are all learning these days, it takes great discipline to maintain good habits and positive states of mind. This can extend from the need for exercise or rest to the focus necessary to work or do school from home to spiritual practices that will keep us close to God when we are separated from our regular religious rites and routines. The letter’s author instructs his readers to “set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed;” to not allow present circumstances to dictate the way that we will live our lives when we can again be a fuller participants of our communities.

In ancient societies, it was expected that children would obey their fathers; the same is expected here of God’s children. Because God the Father is holy, God’s obedient children must also be holy.² This is again reminiscent of the time of the Exodus when Moses would implore the people of Israel to be holy: to do so by caring for the widow and the orphan, by welcoming the foreigner and the stranger, by being a light among the nations; to do all of this while they were

¹ David Bartlett, *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 12

² Jannette Ok from *WorkingPreacher.com*

wandering in exile as a preparation for how they would conduct themselves once they reached the promised land. As God had loved them, they were to love others. As God had shown mercy upon them, they were to show the same kind of mercy.

Holiness and obedience are the building blocks to a community of mutual love and support. God calls us to be a people – speaking to *us* far more than just to *me*. In order for this love to be genuine, it must be sincere and not hypocritical. For a resident alien, such love might mean that their fellow Christians would not betray them to local authorities. For us, today, this means we offer to help our neighbor not just to feel good ourselves, but to protect someone that is more vulnerable; and, we practice safe hygiene not just to prevent getting sick ourselves, but because we also do not want to increase the health burden on society.

Mutual love – caring for one another even during times when we are not in close or regular contact with one another – requires obedience. Ben Franklin famously said: *we must indeed all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.*³ We look around and see restaurants and shops closed; we hear the staggering numbers of people who are jobless or furloughed; we see reports of hundreds or thousands of cars lined up for food handouts; and we realize that what is needed during this time is obedience. As fragmented and inconsistent as the messages about what we should be doing have unfortunately been, public health officials have been clear: this is the time to adhere to the best practices of distancing and protection. As much as we might be anxious to go out, to gather again, we – especially we in faith communities – need to show mutual love through sober obedience.

But the other part of the equation – if we take the words of I Peter to heart – is holiness. There are, according to the worldview presented here, two ways of living: either the pursuit of perishable things – like silver and gold; or imperishable things – like the living hope expressed in the word of God. Those who set their hearts on things that endure will endure. But for those who live in pursuit of thing that will not last; they are like grass or flowers which, while beautiful for a while, will eventually fade.

We are often tempted to focus solely on what is beautiful to the eye but will not last. We want to feel better, now; and we find ourselves sometimes willing to pay a significant price for the perishable sense of well-being. Holiness, on the other hand, means seeking to live in a way that will be pleasing and acceptable to God. As was revealed during the time of the Exodus, and again through the life of

³ Quoted by David Bartlett, *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 12

Jesus, God wants his children to love and accept one another; and for that love to be genuine. This means that we focus on *we* more than *me*; that we continually lift one another up in our thoughts and prayers. This means that we hang together, even when present circumstances mean that we must safely distance from one another. This means that we sacrifice some of our preferences and conveniences for the present time because there is a better future ahead that is worth the temporary cost.

These two foundations of obedience and holiness are key ingredients to genuine, mutual love; love that comes from the heart. I Peter calls Christians to love eagerly, with outstretched hands, not waiting timidly for someone to ask for help, but asking themselves – even in the midst of strange and difficult circumstances – what can we do? It means committing to loving, honoring and welcoming others just as God has loved, honored and welcomed us. In the joy of salvation that we imagine, where God’s love lives and grows, no one is a stranger, an outsider or an alien. No one is forgotten or left behind. God’s love creates a home for everyone.⁴

I want to thank everyone who is worshipping with us today – whether you are joining live or at some other time. Thank you for being part of this community of faith and the living hope that it represents to one another and for the world that is watching. The genuine, mutual love that you are modeling is having an impact on others; those we see and those we cannot. Your prayers from the heart and your acts of holiness and obedience are helping to create a better future for all of us. This present time of trial will not last; for a while, yes, but not forever. What will endure is the word of God; the promise of salvation revealed to us – and in this day through us – in Jesus Christ. All thanks and praise to God. Amen.

⁴ Judith Jones from *WorkingPreacher.com*