

“The Heart of Christianity”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
February 24, 2019

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 1

New Testament Lesson: Luke 6:27-38

Ralph W. Beiting, founder of the Christian Appalachian Project, tells of an Easter visit he and some of the ministry’s volunteers made one year to families living along a Kentucky mountain creekbed. They stopped at one shack where a man and woman lived with their children. Their only heat was from a fireplace. The family proudly ushered their visitors over to a corner of the dim room, where their 2-month-old child lay – not in a crib, or a bassinet, a cradle or even a pillow-lined basket. This child, the family’s most precious treasure, lay in a cage made of tightly woven chicken wire. After a moment of stunned silence, Beiting’s curiosity and concern got the better of him, and he asked the parents why they had their little child in this cage. “We have to have him in this little cage so the rats won’t eat on him.”

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.” How hard is it for us to hear a story like that and not jump to condemnation and harsh judgment? And yet, it wasn’t cruelty that motivated that father when he took the chicken wire and built the cage. On the contrary. Like nearly every parent, he deeply loved his newborn son. No doubt he built the cage with love in his hands and desperation in his heart.¹

Jesus calls us to do the hardest things as followers of Christ – things like not judging others, turning the other cheek, letting someone take not only your coat but your shirt, giving to everyone who begs, and when someone takes your possessions from you, don’t ask for them back. So hard.

You practically have to be a saint to live like that. It’s like the priest who was visited by a parishioner confessing he stole a goose from someone’s poultry yard. “That is very wrong,” said the priest. “Would you like to take the goose, Father?” asked the man. “Certainly not. Return it to the man whom you stole it from.” “But, Father, I have offered it to him and he won’t take it.” “In that case,” said the priest, “you may keep it yourself.” With the man’s gratitude still ringing in his heart, the priest arrived home and found out it was his goose that was stolen. He had been offered it; but declined to take it.

¹ And God Can Move Mountains (Kentucky: Potomac Publishing, 1989), 32.

It is so hard to give without asking in return, to forgive unconditionally, to turn the other cheek. I mean after all, isn't our society built on such principles as fairness, the rule of law, crime and punishment?

Sure it is. And that's OK. Jesus isn't saying to throw out the system that makes society work. This teaching isn't about how to keep people in line. It's about what that line in the sand does to us, as human beings.

When we live our lives based on the principles of tit-for-tat fairness, the rule of law, crime and punishment – when that's the basis of who we are as an individual – we lose our humanity, our ability to give without expecting something in return, our ability to forgive without demanding an apology, our ability to help those who can't or won't help themselves.

Without generosity, grace and mercy, and a ready helping hand at the core of who we are, we are doomed to live and die under the judgment of a cruel and heartless society. How many people here received a hand up early in life, maybe to be able to get your first job, your first car, your first house? I know I did. Go ahead, raise your hand if someone helped you with these or other things?

Now think if you hadn't had that help. Think back to your late teens or early twenties. You're just out of high school or college, you need a car or you're ready to buy a house, but you don't have the money. What's more, imagine you don't have anybody in your life who can help you get a job, earn the money. No pointers on where to look for work. Would you be where you are today without that person who helped you? Few of us would.

The point is none of us can get by without a helping hand. People who don't have access to assistance get stuck – stuck in poverty, stuck in dead-end jobs unable to put a decent roof over their heads, maybe even living in some rat-infested shack doing whatever's necessary to protect their little baby.

The Christian Appalachian Project was created to provide just such assistance, giving folks a helping hand, helping them to help themselves. It and countless government and non-profit programs like it were created – not on the principles of fairness, the rule of law, crime and punishment – but on the principles of generosity, grace and mercy, and a ready helping hand, the principles Jesus instilled in the Christian community some 2,000 years ago.

Are those still the principles that drive our country today? Or have we become a nation of tit-for-tat fairness, a rule of law that favors the rich and powerful, a legal system struggling under a blurred sense of right and wrong? And if so, why is that?

Dr. Stancil, in this morning's Adult Sunday School class on the false Gospel of Legalism, explained that having a rule or regulation that is blindly followed for every situation overlooks what Jesus teaches about the heart of Christianity.

At the heart of Christianity, we find relationships, not rules. When Ralph Beiting entered that Appalachian shack and saw a baby in a chicken-wire cage, he could have called the police. That would have been the right thing to do, legally.

But instead, he took the time to learn what was really going on. And in that moment, he uncovered a greater crime – abandoning people to poverty without even trying to help them help themselves.

When we as individuals turn the other cheek, give sacrificially, and seek a higher, more principled sense of justice, we come into solidarity with those who have no other choice, those laid flat by brutality, those robbed of opportunity and blocked from the grace and mercy of true justice.

Through Jesus Christ, God is continually transforming us into channels of the Lord's care and compassion, rather than the blunt instrument's of unchecked vengeance, greed, and power.

For Jesus, it's all about our relationship with God and, through that, our relationship with one another. For our families to be healthy, for our society to thrive, we as individuals need to embody the teachings and principles of Jesus. And to do that, we need to be mindful of what it's like to be beaten down in life, what it's like to be in need, what it's like to be unjustly judged and condemned. This helps us draw closer to others and to God.

Think about it. Those who are meek, impoverished and oppressed – even though they suffer terribly – often find it easier to realize and appreciate just how much they need God's strength, provision, and justice.

On the other hand, those who have no problem asserting themselves, who have plenty of money, those for whom the rules are easily bent – for them, their need for God is not so obvious, because they can go it alone and get along fine. For them, a sense of solidarity with the poor and needy and compassion for the disadvantaged is critical to their spiritual well being.

No matter where you find yourself – in need of a helping hand or happily doing great – we all need God. We need God to shape us into individuals, families and societies that reflect God's forgiveness, God's abundance, and God's grace and mercy.

Just as it was in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, so it is now. It is up to us to instill in society a true sense of unconditional love, selfless generosity, and divine justice. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we come to you in gratitude for your love, which is always present to us. In the stillness of these moments, we remember with thanksgiving the times when your love has enabled us to rise to our better selves.

We remember, too, the times when we have acted in anger rather than in love; we recall with remorse when our patience has been less than perfect and our behavior has been harsh and mean-spirited.

Forgive us for those times we have loved things and used people, when we have failed to make love a priority in our lives.

Breathe in us new life, making us joyful for the opportunity to try again, to do better.

Empowered by your love, O God, let us be a channel for your care and compassion.

Where there is injury and hurt, let there be healing.

Where there is anger, send the Spirit of your love.

Where there is grief and sorrow, confusion and upset, send your Spirit of peace and the assurance of your faithful presence, even amid the hardest times imaginable.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus, who made your presence known the world over, and who taught us to pray to you saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;**

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.