

FLESH AND BONE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on World Communion Sunday, October 4, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Kim Delivers a Secret Sucker Punch

I've been a little disillusioned this last week. It was rough, so the sermon is more for me than for you today. It's sort of what I need to hear, partly because we had the 45th school shooting of the year. That's part of it, but I won't say anything more about it.

Another event, however, a bit of a sucker punch for me — you can trust me to be courteous — was the papal visit. Anybody who has had any private conversations with me knows that I have some problems with the Catholic church. After all, I'm a Protestant for good reason!

But I was encouraged by the new Pope's demeanor and his kind outlook. I was hopeful. His message to the poor and the rich, to the incarcerated and the powerful, to the homeless and dozens of billionaires was inspiring. It was a message of hope. It was a message of moral rectitude so desperately needed. It was a call back to the teachings of Christ.

But then I learned at the end of his visit that the Pope had met secretly with Kim Davis, the county clerk down in Kentucky who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Now once again, I'll be delicate. Ms. Davis is a child of God, made in the image and likeness of God, as we are. She is a Christian, and she is acting upon the dictates of her conscience, as we all should try to do.

Three brief quotes: Her lawyer said that the Pope told her to stay strong. Now that remark can be interpreted in dozens of ways. Stay strong in resistance to the law? Or stay strong in dealing with the media? Davis herself said, regarding her meeting with the Pope, "Great encouragement, just knowing that the Pope is on track with what we're doing and agreeing." So that was her take on it.

The Vatican Responds too Little, too Late

Then about three days later, three 24-hour news cycles later, the Vatican finally came up with a statement saying that the meeting "Should not be considered a form of support for her position." It's a little too late for that, in my view.

Now, despite my hope in the new Pope, it needs to be said that he's never been unclear about his position on homosexuality. The preferred language the Vatican uses is that the condition is "inherently disordered." But there has been no change at all in the Catholic church's policy regarding homosexuality.

The Pope then went on to talk about Ms. Davis being a conscientious objector. That also hurt some. It's like, really? I thought it was more like a government employee becoming a kind of vigilante, taking the law into her own hands.

When I think of "conscientious objector," my mind always goes back to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Jesuit priest, 1881-1955). In the

unbelievably violent World War I, he refused to bear arms, so he was assigned duty as a stretcher-bearer on the front lines in North Africa for two years. A stretcher needs to be carried by two people, and Chardin lost the other person several times during combat. Still, he memorized some verses from the Koran so that he could bless both Muslim and Christian dead.

Davis Symbolizes the Continuing Discrimination by the Catholic Church

Now, I don't know Ms. Davis at all, and I would not wish this upon anybody, let alone friend or foe, but Ms. Davis has become a symbol now, and I grieve for her because of that. But for anyone with any progressive blood in their veins, she is now a symbol of the Catholic church once again using its power and influence to discriminate, to judge who is in and who is out.

And so in a symbolic way, regardless of this particular instance du jour, it brings up the vale of tears, it brings up the memory of the church's blessing as this country was founded, as the Europeans entered into North America and either relocated or exterminated the indigenous peoples. There are not very many native people left to protest.

This reminds me of the church's blessing upon slavery, instituted by God. It also reminds me of the second-class status of women, over and over and over again. And it's not like the church is helping out in trying to ameliorate that condition. It's dragging its feet. It's like *the* main support for keeping women in a second-class condition.

And of course there's the continuing and relentless discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Once again it's the church that's

in the forefront of discrimination, lending support to that immoral situation.

A Vale of Tears Leads Back to the Basics

So let me preach to myself because all of these things suffer from an outrageous vale of tears, every single one of them. So when I feel down, I try to go back to the basics, try to remember the basics. It's exactly like the '69 Mets. Practice the basics. Practice the fundamentals. If you're losing, losing, go back to the basics.

So here are some of them: Just a reminder for me. You can listen in if you want to. My dad's favorite verse was Micah 6: 8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Remember that. Let it sink in. Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly.

Jesus Sums It All up in the Law of Love

Jesus said it all got summed up in the law of love: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, strength, mind and soul, and thy neighbor as yourself." The thing I love about this verse is heart, strength, mind, and soul. Your heart, your guts, your emotion. Your strength, your biceps, your glues, your body, your mind, and your soul. In other words, the whole of who you are. Every single facet of who you are.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Golden Rule. I keep forgetting that one. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The moral principle. The ethical principle. I read somewhere, "Blessed are the peacemakers." I also read somewhere, "Judge not that you be not judged," the most ignored commandment in the Bible.

The basics find their place in our Bulletin each Sunday. That interplay of us living in God and God living in us. There are two passages about it, one from the Book of Acts, where it says that “Divinity is that within which we live and move and have our being.”

And then Jesus taught that “The kingdom of heaven is within you.” He emphasized it, *within you*. Don’t look over there. Look *within you*. And that’s the mystical interplay that we live in divinity and divinity lives in us.

I’m at the point in my spiritual maturity when I remember that close to two dozen times a day. I’m doing pretty well at it, and I’m proud of that. But it needs to be more because that means I forget it about a thousand times a day.

I read somewhere, “One who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.” For me that’s right up there with the Golden Rule as far as an ethical principle goes. If you’re without sin, feel free. Pick up a rock, throw it at somebody. But do a self-examination first.

A Favorite Verse: Love Is Patient & Kind

There’s another favorite of mine buried deep in First Corinthians 13. That’s the famous love chapter that you always hear at weddings. It says, “Love is patient and kind.” The problem I have with love is that I can’t wrap my mind around it. I can’t quite get a feeling for it. It’s ethereal. It’s mystical. It’s philosophical.

But kindness is something that I can get. Every single action we do in our world can be done either with or without kindness. “Honey, can you get me a cup of coffee?” “Sure.” Well that “sure” can be said dripping with contempt, or it can be said sweetly with kindness.

Every single thing. “Honey, would you take out the garbage?” “Yes, dear.” And that “yes, dear” can be said with contempt, meanness, or with kindness. Every single thing we do. Kindness is love made practical. The quote says, “Love is kind.”

So there’s my list. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” “Thou shalt love.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” “Judge not.” We live in God, and God lives in us. “The one who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.” And “Love is kind.”

So that’s what I needed to hear today.

First Communion not About Communion

Today is World Communion Sunday, so let me sort of change the subject. I’d like to remind you about a core message concerning communion. Once again, it’s something that gets overlooked in all the other stuff that’s involved.

Jesus and his disciples were celebrating Passover. They weren’t celebrating communion. Communion didn’t exist. They were celebrating Passover. Passover was their recognition of their salvation. Salvation in modern parlance is one of the most bastardized words that exist. The entire meaning of it has been lost. It has been devolved into “Well, are you going to heaven or hell?” “I don’t know. We’ll find out.”

That’s not what it meant. It was a remembrance of the Exodus event. And there are three main metaphors that undergird the core of that event: The Jews were lost, and then they were found. They were slaves, and

then they were free. They were hungry, and then they were satisfied.

They wandered in the wilderness and found their way via the leadership of Moses into the Promised Land. They were hungry, and they complained. They were given manna in the wilderness, and finally they came to the land of milk and honey. They were slaves, four hundred years in Egypt. They were bound, and now they were free.

But the issue here is that, for each one of those metaphors, lost/found, hungry/satisfied, slave/free, for each one of them there's a physical dimension that sort of grabs our attention, but it's just the tip of the iceberg.

Lost, Hungry Is not What It's All About; Rather It's About Lost, Hungry in the Soul

You can be lost at the mall. You can be lost on a trip. It's just like that's trivial compared with being lost in your soul. You can be hungry. It's like, time for a meal. You're thirsty. Time for a glass of iced tea. But that's not what it's about. There are hunger and thirst deep within us at the soul level.

And yes, somebody can be a slave. That didn't happen to any of us, thank God, but we know what it means to be actually enslaved. But that is nothing compared with being bound in our soul by our beliefs, by our habits, by all sorts of things that can constrict a human life.

And this symbolism means being found, being satiated, and being free at the soul level for all of us. And so that's what they were celebrating as they remembered Passover, the Exodus event that formed them into a nation.

So my suggestion to you is to remember some of these things throughout this coming week as you get hooked into the news cycle, and particularly as you come up to this table in a moment to celebrate communion.

Now I'll conclude with the way one of the Gospels concludes, in which Jesus says, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.

Amen.