

Sermon

One of the things that stood out to me from our week at Montreat was a quote from Loli, our preacher for the week. She paraphrased from an old quote: She said you have a new job title – Prophet. And the job description for prophet is to Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable. And I feel it is fair warning to let you know – I am prepared to do just that.

The theme of Montreat this year was “A World of Difference”. And with that in mind, the week before the conference, I wondered how on Earth they could possibly tackle the big issues of the world today. But they didn’t. They didn’t even try. Rather, the leadership, keynote speaker and preacher broke it down into smaller pieces. Starting day one with making a difference in your own life, then progressing through our own circles of influence; family, church, and peers. And finally ending the week with the world. And what we learned is that when we make a difference in the people around us, we really are making a difference in the world.

One of the biggest ways we can make a difference is right here, in this church, with the people around us. One of the Bible stories we focused on this week was John 9:1-35, the story of a blind beggar who was healed by Jesus, and then the fallout from that. Let’s start by looking at John 9:1-12

9 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ⁷ “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. ⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked. ¹¹ He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.” ¹² “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said. Now, if my son had been born blind and was miraculously healed, I’d be praising God. I’d be so happy, I’d have a party and all of you would be celebrating with me!! Woot Woot!

But they don’t. For this first part of the story, his parents don’t even seem to be around. It was his neighbors who first made a fuss. Not to celebrate, but to question. Some of them didn’t even believe it is the same man. So they asked him what happened – and he told them he was healed by Jesus. Their next question: “where is he?”. So rather than celebrating with him, they drag him in to see the Pharisees. They need to know what’s going on here.

Vs. 13-17

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided. ¹⁷ Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."

The Pharisees don't celebrate the miraculous healing. They don't even seem to be happy for him. They are questioning him about Jesus. How exactly did he receive his sight? They are more concerned that Jesus had performed this miracle on the Sabbath. Vs 18-23

¹⁸ They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. ¹⁹ "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" ²⁰ "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. ²¹ But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

They don't believe him, so they bring in his parents. His parent's only acknowledge that his man is their son and that he was born blind. They are so afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue that they don't even support their son. They aren't celebrating. In fact, they distance themselves. They say "let him speak for himself". They aren't backing him up, they don't stand up for him. Again and again, they question the man. Vs 24-27

²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" ²⁶ Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

Over and over, the man answers their questions. Now, here comes the rough part: vs 28-33

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They insulted him and the man finally lets them have it. Now, look what happens in vs 34 ³⁴ To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

This man was let down by his family and rejected by his faith community. A church that time and time again throughout the gospels chose legalistic rule following over the way of Love. The faith community and the leaders of the synagogue were so concerned with proving Jesus was a sinner that they threw out anyone who followed him. They couldn't even be happy for a man to have been given sight. His own parents were so concerned with being accepted in the faith community that they didn't stand with him. During my week at Montreat, I listened as several of the young people spoke about questioning the existence of God, mostly based on the attitudes and behaviors of people in their families and churches. Feeling rejected they question the very existence of the God we claim to follow. There's a hymn that echoes the words of John 13 “And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love”.

Not by our works, not by our rules, not by our laws! They will know we are Christian by our love. In all 4 gospels Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees what is the most important law. And Jesus replies – To Love the Lord your God and to Love your Neighbor as yourself. Rule #1 Love God Rule # 2 Love your neighbor. That's it. Two simple commands, and they are both love. All the other laws Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are to be held in light of those two commands. Church, we are not to choose the legalistic rule following over Love. Love is the greatest commandment. The way to make a difference in the world is to love. There is a great demand for it. Your attitude should always be loving.

One of the greatest ways we can make a difference in the world is by supporting and loving our young people. Stand up for them. Back them up. I know the stereotypes you may have about “young people nowadays”. But you cannot judge an entire group by the stereotype. Trust me; the young people know the stereotypes old people have about them. I've been working in the lives of young people for the past 13 or 14 years of my life; in the school, in scouts and in Sunday school. And I've been privileged to chaperone the Montreat trip the last few years. The young people here today and in churches throughout the country are smart, thoughtful, hopeful, hard working and yes, questioning. They are funny and spontaneous. Their laughter is contagious. If you're concerned about the state of young people today, don't make negative comments. Get involved. I know not everyone has the gifts to be youth leaders or Sunday school teachers. You can say an encouraging word, you can send a card. You can volunteer at the library, the school at the Boys and Girls club. You can pray, you can encourage. You can Love. Be inclusive. Listen to what these young people have to say. Because they are also having a hard time. They are subject to bullying, stress over college admissions, and grades, standardized testing and ever increasing demands on their time. The LGBTQ community face rejection in many places. Those that just don't seem to fit in, those that don't fit the mold fear rejection. There is racial and social injustice. There are stresses around every corner. And these young people need you in their corner. Stand up for them. Let them know they are loved. Don't be the legalistic rule following church. Be the church that chooses the way of Love.

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.^[a] “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii,^[b] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Sermon

In addition to going to Montreat this year, I had the opportunity to go to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium, an event held at Purdue University that happens every 3 years. Similar to Montreat, churches from all across the country gather to meet at Triennium, but instead of gathering as a group of roughly a thousand people, there were over five thousand attending Triennium. The theme for Triennium this time was Go. Go into the world, go and serve others, go and do likewise. One of the stories that helped lay the foundation for what this conference was about was the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is one of the most popular parables we hear about and it has a seemingly simple and accessible enough message that Sunday schools through adult Bible studies have been able to cover it. But while the message of the parable is easily understood, its application can be often forgotten. And for good reason. Most of the emphasis of the passage is put on the Golden Rule portion. While it can be easy enough to say love your neighbor and even do so, most of the time, the neighbors that we find ourselves helping are the ones who we are comfortable helping. They are our best friends, our closest family, the ones that we find ourselves constantly around and mostly in agreement with. But more often than not, the neighbor we are called to love is someone we would rarely associate with. Beyond that, not only would we want to avoid helping them because it's inconvenient, but also because we feel there is a sort of justified reason for us abandoning them. In their view, the priest and the Levite had a good reason for avoiding the injured man. Helping a man who was on the verge of death would make them ceremonially unclean. Worse, if someone saw the priest

helping the injured man, he could face judgement from other priests and members of the synagogue, as well as further punishment. In the case of the Samaritan, he could have also passed along the man on the side of the road. Because of a long standing feud between the two groups, this would have been not only accepted, but encouraged. Instead, he decided to overcome the societal pressures and hatred he had been raised to feel towards the Jewish man, and helped him. He saved the man's life and took it upon himself to care deeply enough that he sacrificed much of his time and his wealth to make sure the man was truly alright. Often, we see the Good Samaritan story as a one time only, unexpected but not controversial, good deed. But what the Good Samaritan was doing was not just one good deed for someone in a time of need, but instead, an attempt to try and bridge the gap between two groups who had previously been taught to be opposed to each other. Loving your neighbor, while having a simple enough ring to it, is tough. Most of the time, the situations where we need to do so exist in very gray areas. For a long time, no one blamed the church for being a place that was sacred and separate from the world. In the process of doing so, however, people of all different walks of life were neglected and left to the side of the road. But now, we have the chance to build bridges between us and those left out, to overcome the inherent negative feelings we may have towards others. When Jesus asked who truly loved their neighbor of the three, the correct response wasn't the one who followed the law the closest, but the one who, instead of showing expected neglect or hatred, showed kindness. My charge to you is just as Jesus says at the end of the passage, "Go and do likewise".