

Sermon for Sunday, January 29, 2017 - "God in Pain"

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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God in Pain

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Who do you picture when you hear the word 'blessed'? Often we think about those who have a lot going for them - people who are, quote, "blessed with good looks, with smarts, with natural abilities." On social media, friends and celebrities share pictures of happy families, fancy cars, extravagant homes, and use the hashtag, the identifier, *#blessed*. When things work out well for us we say, "I feel so blessed." In the images and popular speak of our day, blessed are the beautiful people, the lucky people, those on top of their game.

It would be quite surprising to hear someone say, "I'm really poor in spirit and depressed, what a blessing"; "I'm so meek, people walk all over me - wow, am I blessed." You'll rarely see Facebook posts that read, "Feeling blessed to have yet another chance to show mercy to someone who hurt me"; or "Longing for righteousness here, getting pretty hungry and thirst for it actually - quite a blessing." The people that Jesus says are blessed are not who you'd expect in our day or in his day. Jesus calls blessed those who are hurting, long suffering, passionate for righteousness, striving for peace and persecuted for doing the right thing.

Notice - These types of people all have one thing in common. They are all identified by pain - by their own pain or by their engagement with the world's pain. They are not the well-off, the wealthy, the lucky. They are those marked by pain. And Jesus says they are blessed. We are so often uncomfortable with pain. It asks so much of us. It is a burden. We have all sorts of strategies to deal with pain - avoid it, ignore it, sweep it under the rug. We try to explain it away. We tell those who are too bothered by the pain of the world to gain a broader perspective. We don't want to get too close to pain, our own and others.

Jesus doesn't let us do that. In his Sermon on the Mount, his teaching to his disciples then and now, Jesus directs our attention to the places of pain and struggle, to those wrestling with it all. He says look at them. God has chosen to bless and honor and love them. God has chosen to be identified with the pain of the world. This is radical. Often we think suffering means we have been abandoned by God. People and places scarred by pain are said to be godforsaken. When things are going well, we think God has blessed us; when things fall apart we don't know what to think about God.

Jesus teaches us that God has chosen to bless and to be with those who face suffering - that God has chosen to be *in* pain. Jesus teaches this and then shows it by his death on the cross. In the cross we see that God has chosen to be *in* the pain of the world. God has chosen to not avoid or minimize the pain of the world, but to fully engage it for the sake of the healing of all creation.

Now still, we see God most clearly and consistently amid suffering - in the hospital room, the funeral home, the war zone, the refugee camp, the detention center. Many of us here have found that to be true in our own lives. We have known God's presence most fully in times of grief or when we are walking with people who are in need. We have cried out, "Where are you God," and have come to see that God is right there with us. God is *in* the pain, working, blessing, healing, and new life. When we see that those who are in pain are blessed by God's presence, that God is with us *in* pain, this gives us a helpful way to view and engage the world. Rather than seeing the needs of our neighbors as a nuisance or something to be pitied, we can see need as a place to meet God. Rather than offering charity because we are so blessed and should give to those less fortunate, we can be with them in their need looking together for the blessing of God's healing presence. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the pain of the world, we can trust that God is at work in the suffering - that God gives us what we need to join that work.

In these days, many of God's beloved children who are Muslim are in deep pain. Mosques are being attacked and burned, Muslim women are being harassed, Muslims seeking to enter the US are detained at airports this weekend and banned from entering the country. In these days our own Todd Green, Luther Professor and spouse of our member Tabita Green, also is in pain. Todd has been tirelessly advocating for respect and understanding for Muslims as Islamophobia grows. He is receiving verbal attacks and threats as he does his work; and now a recent article has taken aim at Tabita as well. Todd and Tabita are living the Beatitudes - they are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, they are showing mercy and they are being reviled for doing this.

Good Shepherd - How will we stand with Muslims who are experiencing this suffering and with those who have entered this pain like Todd and Tabita? As Christians we can and should have a variety of perspectives on politics and social issues. We can and should disagree. But we cannot be silent in the face of harassment, discrimination, and hatred - especially when hatred is being done in our name as American Christians. We need to stand up for our Muslim neighbors and for their advocates.

Together we need to do justice, love, show kindness and walk humbly with our God. There will be struggle, certainly, but we will meet God there. And as we do, we will find that God's kingdom isn't a place far away but is found whenever we honor each other as God's children, bear each other's burdens, bind each other's wounds, and care for one another.

Let us pray.

Amen.