

Sermon for Sunday, September 30, 2018 - "Be You, Show Jesus"

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 30, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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

I often find myself saying something like, "I'm not *that* kind of Christian; I'm not like *those* people."

I spend a lot of time getting exasperated at other Christians, muttering to myself, "Get off my team; don't say that!"

I really don't want to be this judgmental. It's just that I want people to see the Christian faith as good news for the whole world, good news that brings life and wholeness and wellbeing to all. And often, what I hear from other Christians does not sound like good news.

I want them to stop speaking for Christians, to stop representing my faith in public.

But, it seems, I'm missing the point just like the disciples did long ago. The disciples come to tell Jesus about *those other people, who aren't doing it right*. Jesus!, they insist, probably sounding like I did when I was tattling on my sister as a kid, "*Jesus! They are healing and casting out demons, but not the way we do it. Make them stop before they ruin everything.*"

Jesus is not impressed by their ego driven appeals, by their need to be right. Jesus does not take their side. He has a strong message for them and for us. He says, "Stop worrying about what those other people are doing. Don't spend your energy fretting and fussing about them. Look at your life, look at your whole self. Consider how you are using your life, your hands, your feet, your eyes. Are you using them to embody God's kingdom's ways and God's love for the world? Don't wring your hands at what they're doing, don't dig in your heels with stubbornness and anger, don't use your eyes to glare at others. Rather, use your bodies and your whole selves for the kingdom of God."

Why risk losing everything just to be right? Jesus has shown us the way to embody love, to create the relationships that are the foundation for the realm of God. We need to show the world what kind of Christians we are rather than proclaim what we are not.¹

These days, so much of our national conversation is cast in terms of us against them. It is so easy to define ourselves by what we are not, thereby casting judgement on others. Yet Jesus calls us to focus on what we can do to share the good news.

Here at Good Shepherd, our lives and our life together embody the love and welcome of Jesus in so many ways: the welcome of refugees and people who are differently abled, our work on behalf of immigrant neighbors, the Ramadan meal we hosted for Muslim students, our commitment to be good stewards of the earth, and our participation in Decorah's Pride parade are just a few examples of this.

I hope we can also embody the love of Jesus in this time when so many people who have been sexually assaulted are saying, "MeToo." I pray that this congregation will offer healing and safety to those impacted by sexual violence - that this will be a place where people will not feel blamed, shamed or pushed to forgive too quickly. I hope that we can listen and respond to stories shared in public and private spaces with empathy and compassion. I give thanks for our Abuse Prevention Program and our work to keep our children, elders and each member safe here. May it be so. I pray, too, that perpetrators of violence will find space where repentance and transformation can happen. Most of all, I pray that all who have been impacted by sexual violence know that Jesus is present in the midst of such suffering.

I want to share a prayer from the book *Soul Weavings* that I have found helpful in this week. This prayer was inspired by the figure of a woman, arms outstretched as if crucified, hung below the cross in a chapel in Toronto, Canada. The anonymous author writes:

"O God, through the image of a woman crucified on the cross I understand at last.
For over half my life I have been ashamed of the scars I bear.
These scars tell an ugly story, a common story,
about a girl who is the victim of sexual abuse.
In the warmth, peace and sunlight of your presence I was able to uncurl the tightly clenched fists. For the first time I felt your suffering presence with me in that event.

I have known you as a vulnerable baby, as a brother, and as a father.
Now I know you as a woman.
You were there with me as the violated girl caught in helpless suffering.

The chains of fear no longer bind my heart and body.
A slow fire of compassion and forgiveness is kindled.
My tears fall now for man as well as woman.

You were not ashamed of your wounds.
You showed them to Thomas as marks of your ordeal and death.
I will no longer hide these wounds of mine.
I will bear them gracefully.
They will tell a resurrection story."²

We are hearing so many stories of late, not all of them ready to be told as resurrection stories. Many of them are challenging our old, familiar stories and patterns of responding, pushing us beyond harmful assumptions and judgements.

It is our call to hold these stories, to hear these stories, to listen to and honor these stories - as painful as it might be - for our listening proclaims God's presence, our empathy embodies Jesus' compassion.

We can do this hard work because Jesus is always at work to bring resurrection, even when it is not yet visible. Jesus is always at work to bring healing and wholeness and well-being to our whole world.

As we listen, share and display compassion, we will show the world who Jesus is. We will embody good news, resurrection hope.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

Notes:

1. Rachael Keefe, "Jesus Is Pretty Clear: We Should Mind Our Own Spiritual Business", <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-30-ordinary-26b-mark-938-50>

2. Lyn King, ed. *Soul Weavings: A Gathering of Women's Prayers*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 113.

