

Sermon for Sunday, August 18, 2019 - “God’s Priorities”

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 18, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

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

What really matters to you? What are your priorities? Cleaning is never a top priority for me and certainly not now. I think there may be dog hair on the ceiling of my house currently. Does it really matter that I’m not completely up on the news of the day? No. What matters is caring for people who are hurting and struggling in my daily life and in the larger world.

Yet still there are dishes and emails and bills; still there are so many competing demands in our life. And often our priorities come into conflict with the commitments other people have. Some people need a clean house to function during a crisis; some people need to garden. I need to exercise. Some of us focus on the care of immigrants above all else, some prioritize those with disabilities, others the environment. It can make for trouble if we get all energized about something that people around us don’t find as important. Things can get tense and even ugly.

I think that’s what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading today - what happens when priorities conflict.

Jesus says some very strange things in this passage. When he asks, “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?” I want to say, “Well yes, I kind of thought that was part of the deal.”

It’s even more surprising to hear Jesus sound stressed out about his work, to hear him lament, “What stress I am under until it is completed!” It seems inappropriate to ask if he’s tried a breath prayer to help with that.

Jesus’ words here are troubling and they’re frankly out of synch with my priorities for a day when we have a baptism. Couldn’t we have a more uplifting and warm passage on this joyous day when Theo is baptized? Do we really have to hear about families being torn apart, about Jesus bringing a refining fire that will cause division on earth? I was tempted to change the Gospel reading for today or just preach on Hebrews. Except, I think that kind of thing is precisely what’s making Jesus mad here - the ways we prioritize comfort and ease over God’s way of justice and well-being for all.

We need to pay attention to what Jesus is saying.

I don't really think that Jesus' words here mean he is pro-division, pro-conflict and anti-family. This is the guy who taught us to love our enemies and do good even to those who hate us. It's the guy who's concerned enough about family that when he's dying on the cross (in the midst of that baptism he refers to in today's passage - that is, dying a really stressful death), he makes sure that his disciple John will care for his mother.

So, what's happening here? I think Jesus is being realistic about what his ministry will mean for him and for his followers. He knows that challenging people's priorities will cause a lot of tension, and he knows we do need our priorities challenged.

Jesus challenges all the ways people in his day, and still today, approach life and religion. We focus so much on ourselves - thinking if only we can do the right things and earn the right rewards, however we define them, then we'll be OK, then we'll have a life of ease. We get wrapped up in all that we're doing, how it's working out for us, how we measure up. This way of being keeps us constantly wondering if we're doing enough, if we have enough, if we are enough. It keeps us judging what other people do, side-eyeing them to see if they have more and what they think of us.

Jesus challenges all of that by telling us you belong to God, you are loved and forgiven, you are more than enough and beloved of God - now get over yourself already. Life is just not all about you. It's not about putting our ease, our families, tribe and nation first. What matters is what God is doing through Christ Jesus to tear down the separations between us and bring in God's justice and mercy. What matters is God's coming kingdom where there will be the conditions that make for true peace and well-being and not just the absence of conflict. Jesus calls us to prioritize God's ways and to participate in what God is doing.

Jesus calls us to turn our focus away from ourselves - our family, tribe and nation - in order to prioritize those who are foreign, forsaken and forgotten.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to serve others without concern for reward, to trust God above all else, to spend time in prayer, scripture, worship and service. These priorities will put us out of synch with others - maybe even with our families, certainly with tribe and nation. This may lead to stress, conflict and tension in our lives.

Yet we are not alone as we live in this way. As Hebrews promises, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have suffered greatly and yet know the deep joy of participating in what God is up to in the world. We are accompanied by Jesus who underwent deep stress out of love for this world. He insisted on loving all people, especially those who were foreign, forsaken and forgotten. He refused to stop agitating for God's justice and peace.

That all led to his death at the hands of the privileged and powerful who wanted a false peace and ease. Yet even his death could not stop what God is up to in Jesus. God raised him from the dead showing that God's life and love, God's kingdom ways will prevail.

We, like Theo, are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus - into a life of hope that is just not about us; it is about participating in what God is up to in the world. It may not be a life of ease, but it is a life of great joy. And we get to share in it together.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.