

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 17, 2020, UPMP

WELCOME:

Good morning! Grace and peace to you from United Protestant Church in Morgan Park, Duluth, Minnesota where it's been cold outside the past few days, the wind is strong, but Spring is coming! The flowers are there, the birds are building their nests—and all of that happy springtime stuff that we feel, even as we have many layers still on.

But we are here, and if it is not warm outside, it's warm in here in our Spirit as we gather with one another. Let's dive in.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 17:22-31

17:22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

17:23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

17:24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,

17:25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

17:26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

17:27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

17:28 For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

17:29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

17:30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

17:31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him

from the dead."

John 14:15-21

14:15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

14:16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

14:17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

14:18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

14:19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

14:20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

14:21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Sermon: "Tools of the Trade"

Ah, the change of seasons... We welcome the comparative warmth, the light, the growth. And then we've been seeing all of those yard and home projects that we didn't quite get around to last year. Organize the garage, fix that damaged garden timber, the winter wear on that one window, all the little tasks—you know, I remember years ago having this same experience, and then my son...oh, he must have been eight or so, slips me this doozy: "Let's build a Treehouse!"...

"..Ok.." I tell him... trying to sound excited.

But for those of you that have met Eliot, you know there are very few things that he "lets go" if he wants it.

Well, ok... but it's tricky here, building a treehouse. I mean, I could tinker around in the oaks and hickories of my childhood, but I have pine, and birch... what do you do with that?

But more to the point: I'm not a very "handy" guy. My saving grace back then on any project were the two neighbors, both of whom build their own houses over thirty years ago and both of whom—you know... can hammer a nail in a few beautiful strokes and not retap, re-straighten, etc. And nowadays, well, Gayle's boys have skills and I just have to accept where my gifts are...I'm handy in the kitchen! I'm a good listener? I'm sensitive and caring. Hey I read pretty well—(preach? Hmm... jury's still out).

The truth is that because I don't know how to use these worker's tools very well, it limits my creativity, my vision, my motivation.

--Maybe that sounded a bit unique..."creativity and vision" to describe tools... but what a positive way to look at tools!

Often we "problem solve". We pose a question and pick apart for an answer. We solve challenges, we get things done... But what about "creating"... ever look at a resource somebody else has and thought "oh, if I had that—the things I can do!" I get this way with skidsteers and backhoes. Oh what I could do with those!

Ok, let's get out of our individual homes and into our collective home: this house of worship.

Let's talk about our tools, friends!

First, a disclaimer: I can't tell you how to use a tool, all I can tell you how *I use* the tool. Or how I've witnessed others using the tool... by no means are my examples the last word. God dwells in each of us uniquely.

My best example of this metaphor—this intersection between hardware and theological tools—was travelling both in Nicaragua and East Timor:

Now, I know what a machete is, and I imagine it's use... slicing brush to clear a path... But I saw in both places how the tool can be used for so many other things: ...potato peeler, ditch digger, screw driver, trowel and level, bottle opener... on and on and on....I remember thinking "I gotta get one of these things!"... but I still haven't. They're kind of scary.

Point is that all I can tell you is how I have seen the tools utilized. And how I use them myself.

But this might be the best synopsis of all of our theological conversations.... They are essentially asking: "what tools do we have?" and "how do we use them?"

Take Paul's understanding of God. What does Paul say... here in the book of Acts. We get an example of Paul "talking shop" there in Athens...as he sees the "objects of worship"... and Paul share's his understanding:

God is everything, made everything.

God doesn't live in shrines made by human hands.

"we ought not to think that the deity is like gold... or silver, or stone...or an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals."

God doesn't "need" us. "Nor is he served by human hands"

These may seem like "no brainers" to us, but to the polytheistic Greeks with their network of dramatic Gods often with very human traits (Mythology can seem like a soap opera) and the animism of their faith, their particular areas of control and response. Here's Paul.

One God. Doesn't NEED humans.

Think of what we've been sharing on Sundays and in Bible Study and in conversations:

We seek to understand Jesus, from birth to death... and here in the season of Easter, we seek to understand resurrection.

And now... Jesus says in the Gospel of John: "God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... this is the Spirit of Truth"

What?

How many of you have had a good conversation or had somebody share with you about the Holy Spirit? It's often often overlooked, or not lingered on... because it's difficult to rest upon concrete things or intellectual reason...the foundations of our Western minds. It's hard to get a grasp of... like air or water or light...

That's the thing: we want to control our tools. So what do we do with something that we really can't control?

I'll be the first to tell you that what's missing now, in this worship, is that collective Pentecost spirit that is present when we gather together. That Holy Spirit. Holy Ghost.

So I want to take a moment and linger on that... and share how I understand the Holy Spirit.

I think it is a force that works like anger... it spreads from the energy of one to the whole, and can influence the whole.

To use an analogy:

“boss yells at worker, worker yells at spouse, spouse yells at child, child kicks dog.”

ANGER as contagious.

I love to consider the “Stop Sign” metaphor. You’re at a four-way and you both go at the same time and have to stop and what does that other driver do? Politely wave? Or yell at you? Give you a gesture? Express anger?

Hey—what do you do?

And if you are “flipped off” or whatever, do you retain that other person’s anger? Does it go home with you, and influence your actions? Are you...contagious with anger?

You have a choice.

As a part of our lives, we either cultivate or inhibit the Holy Spirit. We share it, we spread it... or we hinder it.

We nurture the spirit, nurture each other to open up to its presence in our lives, or we block it...

At it’s best, in time of worship, that time together at church isn’t a “break” from your everyday life... nothing stops, rather it inspires--sometimes instigates--motivation and creativity.

Holy Spirit can also grace us with the gift of endurance. When things seem their worst.

Often the best times of growth come out of seeming desperation, because it’s then when you’re guard is down enough to receive it.

Hope can be hard to see in a time of desperation—we’ve talked about that—but Hope is even harder to see in a time of comfort and complacency.

As we’ve shared before, the “Dark night of the soul” is a good thing. And one of our greatest gifts is how we each share how we’ve used the tools—used the Holy Spirit, to walk in hard times.

I shared a story in the Friday commentary.

--That gift of stories. The gift of testimony. The gift of asking others to tell stories, or the gift of making a space comfortable enough to share. That’s the Holy Spirit.

You know, I think of being the parent of younger kids, and I love to talk with those other parents and I miss it now, because in healthy times, as the kids go off to play, parents begin to share those stories about our kids that we wouldn't dare tell in front of those kids.

And so often we hear: "you're kid too? Mine does that!" Common ground we didn't know we shared.

In our context, here at church, here in the gathering of Christians, every one of us has had some sort of Holy experience. We may have brushed it off as so much instability or madness—that's what our culture's value of reason—the armor of doubt and the weapon of critique—have done to us.

But I bet... no... I KNOW, that if one of you felt empowered to share your story of the Holy Spirit, so many of you would say like those parents: "you too?"

And so: I want to share mine—a bit from that commentary on Friday, because it is a good example of how I "used the tools" and how the Holy Spirit was present.

See, I shared a bit in last Sunday's sermon about how an area of brokenness and pain in my life that I had been carrying for years was erased in a sudden instant by the right conversation with the right person at the right moment. I have to tell you friends, feeling that transformation from pain to healing, from grief to solace, from anger to love is what I hope and pray heaven is all about!

Thing is, we don't have to wait for heaven...it is already here. "*He is not far from each of us,*" Paul spoke to the Athenians, and by golly he's right! See, I knew that my brokenness was unhealthy, and the pain inside of me was also affecting other people. I knew because every day I would keep up my faith practices, and as I turned to God my prayers would remind me that I am, indeed, in need of healing. So I kept moving toward the things that I knew were life-giving to me. I would walk in the woods, spending time with the flora and fauna I love so much. I would play music because I knew that some day I would "feel" it again. I would gather with life-giving, affirmative people (a tip o' the hat to y'all) and share moments of laughter and creativity and good food.

I would write, even if what came out wasn't all I wanted it to be, because I knew it had always been a positive thing in my life. Friends, this is not to pat myself on the back because I "kept working at it"—those things were just self-care. What I really want you to know is that each and every one of those things I was turning to were, in their very presence, gifts from God (TOOLS?)...and it was God's timeline that I was living in, not my own—no matter my tendency to seek instant gratification. *Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven.* At any moment, God truly is not far from us.

And here's the other cool part of the story: all those things I would turn to—nature and music and friendship and words and on and on—those things are still there, and I gotta tell you, when I turn to them now, they fill me with a delight that I haven't felt in a good long time. Thanks God! Even if I couldn't always feel it the way I wanted to, I knew you were always there. Good plan, that one.

I don't mind sharing that, even if I may feel a bit vulnerable putting it out there, because unlike Anger, I want the power and love in the Holy Spirit *to be contagious*. I want you to feel it—oh if I could just share those feelings—that heart being lightened!

We need that for one another, friends. A grace-laden gift from God. And here—speaking of sharing, here’s a quote from a book I read long ago that came to mind this week—I think you’ll know why I’m sharing it! It’s from the book “The Neverending Story” by Michael Ende... many of us have seen the movie, with the luck dragon and the swamps of despair and so many cool things, but this wasn’t in the movie. Here goes:

But then he jumped into the crystal-clear water. He splashed and spluttered and let the sparkling rain fall into his mouth. He drank till his thirst was quenched. And joy filled him from head to foot, the joy of living and the joy of being himself. He was newborn. And the best part of it was that he was now the very person he wanted to be. If he had been free to choose, he would have chosen to be no one else. Because now he knew that there were thousands and thousands of forms of joy in the world, but that all were essentially one and the same, namely, the joy of being able to love.

And much later, long after Bastian had returned to his world, in his maturity and even his old age, this joy never left him entirely. Even in the hardest moments of his life he preserved a lightheartedness that made him smile and that comforted others.

I know I want to be that person. And I hope and I pray that all of us do. So we share it. Keep sharing the Holy Spirit in your lives.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

-Cathy Dale will be here next week.

-I keep prayer requests private because this video goes public. If you would like to be added to the prayer chain, send us a note.

-Thank you for offerings.

-We will begin a Bible Study with healthy distancing. If you’re interested, call me, so that I can be assured we don’t get too large in numbers.

-need a mask? we got you covered. No pun intended (ok...pun was intended)

-want to help with the gardens and grounds? We would value your help! Give a call so we can coordinate.

Prayer