

Generous Disciples: Reformed to Love

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight O Lord, you who are rock, redeemer & Renewer of us all. Amen. (Ps 19:14)

Grace and Peace be with you, dear Friends!

How is it with your soul, Generous Disciples? How did you participate in building God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven?

As we've learned, the call to Discipleship, taking up the cross, involves a commitment to let go of this world (its things, its ways) and to participate in a life of grace (regular spiritual practices/holy habits) reflects priorities of JOY(Jesus, Others, Yourself).

Today we conclude our focus on the way of Discipleship demonstrated in the Markan gospel and the letter to the Hebrews.

So, the first question for reflection, have you grasped 'the width and length, height and depth of God's love' for you?

I realize this mostly a rhetorical question. For me, when I ponder on this thought, the generous & extravagant love God has for me and for you and for all the created world, it brings me to my knees. A warmth envelopes my heart. Tears frequently appear in my eyes, and I need to find support to steady myself in the moment.

The writer of Hebrews tells us yet again of our merciful & generous God, why Jesus Christ is above all, and instructs us on the new covenant of God and God's people through the acts of Jesus Christ. In chapter 8, the writer reminds us of God's promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), not like the covenant made with the ancestors (Law of Moses) written on stones that shatter. Rather, God will place God's laws in their minds & write them on their hearts. Christ, says the writer of Hebrews, is the mediator of this new covenant! Through Jesus' surrender to serve God in love, we are made

new! When we say, “Yes! Lord, you are my all in all”, we are re-formed in love! The love poured out on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice ‘without flaw’ so that I, a sinner, would be set free from slavery to sin & death (WAYS OF THE WORLD) and share in the new life in God’s reign on earth and in heaven. In short, I am not ‘the me’ I used to be since I opened my hands, let go of the world, and TRUSTED in the gift of love from Jesus.

Shifting to the familiar gospel lesson (which partners so well with the Hebrews text), let us remember what has come before this moment of reforming in clarity & wisdom in chapter 12.

Last week we met Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, restoring sight to Bartimaeus. In response, Bartimaeus leaves his most important possession (cloak) and follows Jesus on the way. Here’s what happens next:

- Chapter 11 reveals Jesus’ humble entry into Jerusalem (on a donkey) and his outward objection to the Temple sacrificial system.
- Jesus engages with the chief priests, elders and religious law experts who challenge his authority.
- Crowds gather around for teaching.
 - two parables about generosity are given, the farmers & taxes,
 - as well as a question about resurrection.

Which brings us to the reading today, when a religion scholar, who was observing the encounters, came over and asked, ‘Which commandment is most important of all?’ (v28).

Eugene Peterson writes it this way in The Message: ²⁹⁻³¹ Jesus said, “The first in importance is, ‘Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment that ranks with these.”

Jesus responds with the Way of the Cross... GOD + Others.

But let's not stop here...we must always see what comes next to grasp the fullness of this central text. There are two more stories that round out this 12th chapter...

- Jesus provides clarity on Christ being David's son and
- Jesus teaches on the giving of the widow vs the rich people.

Jesus offers God's perspective: how acceptable is the generous gift of sacrificial self-giving love.

Set in the middle of these lessons, we can see Jesus' priority of re-forming hearts & minds with love for God and God's people.

On this traditional 'Reformation Sunday', we pause to reflect on two actions in history. First, the courage and passion of Martin Luther, who, on October 31 in 1517, nailed the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg.

This act started a 'protest' movement within the church igniting a new thing, the Protestant Reformation. Truly, Martin Luther acted out of love for God and for God's people.

Second, on April 4, 1742, Charles Wesley preached a sermon titled "Awake, Thou That Sleepest," centered on Ephesians 5:14, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." It is the only sermon not written by John Wesley included in John's *Sermons On Several Occasions*, a collection that would be important to stating Wesleyan core beliefs.

In a recent commentary on Wesleyan beliefs, Deacon Charlie Baber writes, 'the challenging part of Charles' message is his belief that otherwise happy people might actually be "asleep," and therefore dead in sin. Wesley describes it this way, "full of all disease, he thinks himself in perfect health." The metaphor of disease to describe the sinful state is well documented in John Wesley's writings. The idea is that God designed humanity in God's image, as very good, but human will chose disobedience, leading to a sort of disease of the soul that affected our abilities to desire or do the things of God. Only the light of Christ can shine upon our disease to awaken us to a new life, where the Holy Spirit alive in

our hearts causes us to desire and do the things of God. This becomes a lifelong process of growing in love for God and love for neighbor. (SANCTIFICATION) For Wesley, this is where true happiness is found. If our soul's purpose is to know and love God, then anything less than that is sleep.

And as we know, John Wesley had his own heartwarming awakening on May 24, 1738; just days after Charles had reported an experience of conviction and justification.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus has reformed the way of God as a way of love, a heart on fire, and a life lived pouring out seeds of love for all people. The symbol of this path of discipleship is the cross, centering on loving God and loving others.

REFLECTION: What does this mean for the Church?

Imagine what love, passion, and generosity it took for the founders of the church known as Saint James to establish this faith community?

Imagine what generous love and service has been offered to the community?

Recall how you have been reformed through giving of your time, prayers, gifts, witness and service to others.

Recall how the offerings of prayers, time, service & witness of others have shed Christ's light for you.

God is still calling to be at work bearing the light of Christ so that others awaken through this faithful people.

This is our task: to live by God's ways, loving God and loving neighbor as ourselves, Being Generous Disciples as we love & as we serve.

Friends, What will you do differently this week because of this Word?

May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Let us JOIN TOGETHER WITH THE LITURGIST, Barbara Cook, AS SHE LEADS us in prayers for God's people, church & World ...