

Sermon: An Example to Believers

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Sunday, October 22nd, 2017
10:00am Worship
Lyons First Presbyterian Church
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Psalm 99:1-5
Matthew 22:15-22

Community Action

A community of people can identify itself in a number of ways—it can be or look or act in a certain way that leaves no doubt as to what that community stands for. Last night at Minute Maid Park in Houston, Texas, which is home stadium of the Houston Astros baseball team, whenever a television camera panned the seats or zoomed into a group of cheering people, the color orange leaps right out. For the community of Astros' fans, one distinguishing identifier is that color. There are a few other baseball teams that showcase that same color, but nearly all of the time when the Astros are playing, there's no mistaking who in a crowd is present and making a statement of support for their Houston team.

Another color we have been seeing a lot of recently is purple. Quite a lot of purple. What is it about? In the U.S., the month of October has been observed as the National Domestic Violence Awareness Month for a number of years, and wearing the color purple is one of the ways people join together in identifying their awareness of the domestic violence issue, support for addressing it, and also celebration for those who have risen up out of situations of “intimate partner violence”² as victors.

In the case of wearing purple in October, which fits a context more serious than those wearing orange, we can hopefully all agree that domestic violence is truly an injustice in our society, yet at the same time we may have difficulty connecting with the injustice personally. We

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, October 22, 2017, the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/10/22/>

² <https://nrcdv.org/dvam/node/348>

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may not think there is some call on us in the face of the injustice. But there is probable a reason why there is just all that purple, right? Probably a reason why it is being put in front of all of us... why there are advocates and purple-bearers in our immediate midst...

National Domestic Awareness Month is proclaimed annually by the U.S. president, and in last year's proclamation President Obama stated that "Our Nation's character is tested whenever this injustice is tolerated."³ And further that ""We all have a role to play in building a bright and safe future for each other and for future generations." Aha... so there it is—the implication for all of us. This is a call from our President to be aware, and when the opportunity arises, to be an example in confronting an element of brokenness in our society. It was also a reminder of the character of the United States, a reminder that others have set examples for us in the past about boldy and courageous standing up against injustice.

What other situations have demanded that someone be a positive example, in order to make things better? What does it look like? In school, at work, at home? In the military, in sports, within the church?

Gospel Example

In the Bible, many examples are given to us in the recorded histories of God's people. There are plenty of example of things going wrong, or people falling short—which we can identify with—but what we are moving toward here are the positive example within communities... the case where a person or group of people stand up for something in an effort to bring attention to it and encourage others to recognize and address whatever injustice exists as well.

Jesus' response regarding the payment of taxes in Matthew 22 is hard to label as an example, as Christ's relationship to us is wholly more than being an example. Yet if we think of

³ *Presidential Proclamation — National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, 2016*, https://americanspcc.org/national-domestic-violence-awareness-month/?gclid=CjwKCAjw4KvPBRBeEiwAlqCB-XEGHrFT-u6BWc2d_McUxcCqyRfTcKFgOwq7Cgnr3sYVua88splb3BoCpzgQAvD_BwE

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specific acts of Jesus' earthly ministry as recorded in the Gospel texts, then we can see examples. In the situation in verses 15-22 where an attempt is made to trick Jesus into speaking against the Emperor, Jesus instead cleverly suggests that the Emperor can have all the temporary returns asked for, while God will receive the higher returns. "*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*" The example in this is that no matter what the situation, no matter what the conflict, there is always a way to remain loyal to God above all.

But this sort of an example of how to be in a trying situation is not easy to emulate... and it is why the Letter to the Thessalonians begins with such an expression of Thanksgiving that the church at Thessalonica is able to follow the example given them:

"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Hear again those three phrases just used: (1) work of *faith*, (2), labor of *love*, and (3) steadfastness of *hope*. Where else in Scripture is this set of gifts listed—faith, hope, and love? 1 Corinthians 13:12-13, the popular passage for the occasion of a wedding is one:

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face ... and now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

In the first Letter to the Corinthians, the writing is about which gifts are highest, which are truest of God's nature, which are to be the focus of lives lived as God's people. And in the first Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul, Silas, and Timothy are holding up the importance of exemplifying these highest gifts to one another.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, the text reads: "*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord ... so that you became an example to all the believers.*" And in the background of what Paul,

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Silas, and Timothy are saying to the congregation at Thessalonica is that this work of being examples is done in community, for it *is* hard to be a Christian alone. We need to provide example for each other... it is how we honor our unique gifts for the health of the group, and for the healing of brokenness of the society in which we live. When this happens, when the work of Jesus is imitated in human ways and we serve as examples to one another—this is the successful spreading of the Gospel! This is the chain⁴ of good news which takes aim at making disciples of all nations⁵

Examples Within the Body

Now, remember how we considered that thinking of Jesus as an example is not quite right... but that we could think of individual acts of Jesus as recorded in Scripture as examples for us. It's because being just like Jesus is such a high standard. We as Christians do fall short, and daily. But in community with one another, we can hold to Jesus' teachings. For when one of us falls short, there is bound to be an example within our Christian community of one who is doing that thing right, that we are struggling with.

So look around for an example of the persistent, lasting gifts of the Spirit: faith, hope, and love. See the example in others around you. Be the example in the areas that fit your unique gifts. Seek to imitate Christ. As believers, we can always use a few more examples around us. Caring for the victims of domestic abuse is a wonderful example in confronting injustice, and imitating Christ. So is living rightly in domestic relationships. Wherever your opportunity is to be an example to believers is, be it. That is how the Good News spreads. Amen.

⁴ New Interpreter's Study Bible, p. 2117

⁵ Matthew 28:19