

From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

Sunday, March 22, 2015

Preacher: Rev. Julie Olmsted

Scripture: John 12: 20-33

Sermon: Beautiful Cross

Nearly 40 days we have been involved in the process of burning. This process of burning is a purification process, a process of letting go, going deep and embracing the beauty, the blessing and the bounty of our faith. In eastern traditions this burning is about burning away our egos. It is the same with us. It begins with ashes and ends with the cross. The cross is an end to the old and a beginning of the new (it takes faith, however). It is a death of sorts, related to the dying for one's sins we spoke of last week. This death is a death into new life. As our Scripture says, "Unless a seed falls to earth and dies, nothing will grow." The seed dies but new life is the result. This is the paradox of our faith. Die in order to truly live.

On Easter we consider the cross, what was so despised, so feared, so lowly, a symbol of death... God turns it into something so beautiful, so loved, so powerful, a symbol of life, not just life, but eternal life, life without end. This is the love offered by a faith in Jesus Christ, to hold your life, to bless it and revive it, to make you want to serve, to give all you've got, to create God's realm in any way you can, to create beauty within you and around you. Beauty is the companion of new life (consider the flowers of Easter). And whether you're young or old, this holds true.

Sometimes things are so important you have a hard time talking about them. You almost feel like whispering the words; you would rather just give the words in some kind of potion, a drink, a piece of bread. Maybe that is what communion is about, that which is beyond words, something so sweet and so powerful, so pure and powerful, you can barely speak. But here is a little try of what the cross says and means and why we love it so well.

God's great love – The story of God sending down his only son to live among mortals and die for their redemption is just a taste of what we can only imagine is God's love for all creation in general, and fallible, sin-filled but lovable human beings in particular. This is theology, that is, not necessarily what actually happened, but the mystery and the story that developed around it. This is our faith's attempt to describe God's great love; this force for life that cannot be killed. So, no matter our past, our failings, or our limited understanding, God's love is ever extending and radically

forgiving. Salvation is simply to accept this love into our hearts. It is to deem yourself at least worthy of this, this amazing love. If you can accept this amazing love from God, you can perhaps learn to accept love from another human being. That's why we say, there is nothing to do but accept it. This is hard for those of us who are great doers. Hard but not impossible!

Vertical plane – Our relationship with God is vertical. It enters us from above and fills us vertically. In Twelve Step programs, God is often referred to as our “Higher Power,” that is, something greater than, higher than, our own limited understanding and ego. In opening our minds to God, we receive wisdom, humility and appreciation of mystery. To accept God from above is not a physical reality, like “up there in heaven.” It's to accept a metaphysical reality, that God is “higher” than I am. As it says in Psalm 100, “It is he who has made us and not we ourselves.” This is a humbling thing. It is a giving up of knowing in order to receive knowledge, knowledge and grace. It is to “become as a child,” as Jesus told us we must do in order to see the kingdom. That means give up knowing everything. That means stop judging others. That means a kind of “prayer without ceasing,” which is to say, don't let go of the connection (or your awareness of it). Let go of everything else.

Horizontal plane - Our relationship with the world is horizontal. Our relationship with each other is horizontal, equals in Christ. Whether we are doctors or lawyers or teachers or floor cleaners or trash removers or bartenders, whether we are employed, unemployed, educated, illiterate, whether we are black or white or yellow or blue, whether we are straight or gay or rich or poor, this horizontality is the equalizer. That's in the cross there. That's the horizontal plane. In our faith we say that we know God's character by knowing Christ. His inclusiveness, his compassion and his servant nature are all models to emulate for the believer. If we only worship God and remain isolated from the world, we are missing the horizontal component of the cross. Then we get ourselves into trouble because we don't learn how to live together. And learning how to live together is God's ingenious way of growing us close to Christ.

God's great power – To die on the cross was the most despicable and hateful way to die in Biblical times. There was no honor and no glory, no dignity and no romance in hanging on a cross till death. But we are told that Jesus was glorified in resurrection and sat at the right hand of God. This is theology. This is a story that reveals truth (not literal truth, but spiritual truth). What truth does this tell us? That regardless of our miserable situation, God can turn it into something beautiful. If we have an addiction, once conquered, God can turn it into an asset, even a blessing. If we are handicapped in some way (as we all are), God can redeem us and make us strong. If we suffer loss, God can make us deeper, more loving and radiant, if we have faith and courage.
ANYTHING IN THIS WORLD THAT BEFALLS US, NO MATTER HOW

DESPICABLE, WRONG AND COMPLETELY HORRIBLE IT MAY SEEM, GOD CAN TURN IT INTO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL. GOD CAN FLIP IT. GOD CAN MAKE IT UNIQUE, DESIRABLE, POWERFUL AND GOOD. HOW'S THAT FOR GOOD NEWS? HOW'S THAT FOR THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS? I do not believe that bad things that happen to people are "God's will." I believe that much of the time, we get ourselves into trouble. And the rest of the time, it is a mystery. God does not will us to be sick, to have bad relationships, to suffer needlessly, or to have wars and poverty. No. God wills us to live in peace and to be happy. And whatever befalls us, with faith and the support of your community, and your own willingness to "do the steps," you can be born again. You can rise from the ashes.

The cross offers us the chance to die to our old selves and step into the light of something new, transformative and totally wonderful. It takes COURAGE to follow the cross ('cause it looks like death, no kidding), to leave behind the individual narrative (our "soap operas"), our personal attachments and become God's own child, a servant, whole and free, dedicated to the healing of the world.

So, when you think it's over, it's not. When you think it's hopeless, it's not. When you think you're finished, you're not. Because with the CROSS, hope is eternal. With the cross, beauty is unfolding, it is imminent, it becomes your identity in Christ, this beauty. Perhaps not physical beauty, but ETERNAL beauty, SPIRITUAL beauty, REAL beauty. This is the practically unspeakable beauty of this old, rugged cross, so despised by the world. But deeply, profoundly and forever radiant, loved, cherished and empowered by God himself. And the best news? We are grafted onto this cross, along with the dearest and best, into a new life of grace and miracles. Amen.