

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**April 14, 2019, Palm and Passion Sunday**

Luke 19:28-40, Isaiah 58:6-12

**SPACE FOR GOD: PRAYER AND JUSTICE/COMPASSION**

**A Sermon Series Based on Donald Postema's *Space for God***

If you've been in my office you may have noticed two bumper stickers that sit on my bookshelves. One is a quote from Gandhi who said: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ."

The other is a quote from the author Jonathan Swift who wrote: "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough religion to make us love one another."

These uncomfortable quotes nudge me in the way I live my faith, and I of course hope they also catch the attention of others who walk through my door.

Our faith isn't just the thoughts in our heads and hearts. The life of faith is how we live life with the people God puts in our paths. It isn't enough to think about being loving, the life of faith calls us to be loving.

Today we reach the end of our journey through Lent as we remember Jesus coming down the Mt. of Olives on a donkey, moving closer to the cross of Good Friday.

And today we are near the end of exploring ways of living and praying our faith with Donald Postema's book *Space for God*. Through these weeks we have:

Been challenged to make more space for God in our daily living.

We have found new ways to say thank you to God.

Last week we talked about the times when we struggle and wrestle with God, and God's welcome and love in the midst of the struggling.

This week we are focusing on how our lives of prayer shape the justice and compassion we give to others.

Postema writes this challenge to us today when he says:

"The spiritual life is not hidden inside us. It's practical—it affects everything we say and do. Living in the presence of God, being in touch with God's Spirit, being fine-tuned to God's sensitivities involves us in reflecting God's concerns for all people, resonating God's moral tone for the world, embodying God's will through our living. In fact, the Old and New Testaments indicate you can tell a person's relationship with God by looking at his or her relationship with other people... 156.1.3

Prayer and the spiritual life you see, are not an escape from life but a confrontation with life." 157.1.8

There are echoes of Gandhi's and Swift's challenge in these words: "...you can tell a person's relationship with God by looking at his or her relationship with other people."

On this Palm Sunday we come as followers of Jesus who showed us what the spiritual life looks like.

He came into Jerusalem that final time riding on a donkey, an animal that signaled peace, not military might.

He came down the Mt. of Olives surrounded by people who knew they were seeing the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God,

They looked at Jesus and saw, as we do this morning, the One:

Who loved the unlovable,

Who spent time with those who weren't welcomed in church,  
 Who made time for children,  
 Who wrestled with what it meant to live God's words in Scripture,  
 They saw the Messiah:  
 Who told stories of ordinary life to ordinary people so they would see God all around them,  
 Who challenged those who spoke love for God, but showed hatred for those who weren't like them,  
 Who called to people with words that echo our reading from Isaiah this morning, as he called them to: feed the hungry, visit the sick and those in prison, clothe those who were cold, and give shelter to those without homes.

The crowds shouted: "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," because the Messiah of Peace and love was in their midst. But the religious leaders wanted the crowds silent.

But joy, and justice and peace and the love of God cannot be silenced. Jesus said to them: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:39-40) Creation itself recognized the conquering power of Love as Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

After coming down the Mt of Olives, surrounded by the shouting, joyous crowds, Jesus stopped and looked out over the city of Jerusalem. Luke says that when Jesus saw the city, he wept over it, saying: "If you even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes...because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." (Luke 19:41-44)

On this Palm Sunday, it is the time of our visitation. We too are called to see our Messiah, on the way of Peace, coming into our hearts and lives and asking the world of us,  
 asking us to be the ones who choose the ways of peace,  
 who truly see the people and the needs around us.  
 The Messiah calls us to show that we belong to him by the way we treat the people in our lives.

Postema says that the way we do this, the way that we choose the path of justice and peace and compassion is through prayer first. He writes: "(159.2.5) Prayer opens us to a closeness with God, the compassionate God we know in Jesus Christ. And the closer we get to God, the closer we get to the people of the world. We find the world at the heart of God."

On this Palm Sunday we see how Jesus chose to live the life of faith, and the path he chose to walk for us. Walking toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Sunday, we stop this morning on our journey of spirituality, to open our hearts to the world.

Because Jesus continues to look over our cities and weep, lamenting still: "if only you knew the ways that make for peace."

Postema's words call to us: "The spiritual life is not hidden inside us. It's practical—it affects everything we say and do... the Old and New Testaments indicate you can tell a person's relationship with God by looking at his or her relationship with other people."

If this is true, then we are called to turn with our weeping Messiah, and live what we believe, with the people who are around us here.

It is us now who are called to be the compassion that walks the streets of our cities.

It is us who are called to see the hungry and bring food, and to see the homeless and act.

We are the ones called:

To love the unlovable,

To learn who doesn't feel welcomed in our church, and change our welcome,  
 To make time for children,  
 To wrestle with what it means to live God's words in Scripture,  
 To learn the stories of life Jesus told, so we can help others see that God is all around us,  
 To offer love and peace, as the world shouts for hatred and division.  
 It is us now who are called to live the life our Savior Jesus has shown us.

With the guidance of Postema we start that journey and we continue that journey with prayer. Because as he writes: "Prayer opens us to a closeness with God, the compassionate God we know in Jesus Christ. And the closer we get to God, the closer we get to the people of the world." "Prayer and the spiritual life you see, are not an escape from life but a confrontation with life."

So, I'm going to invite you into a time of silent prayer using Postema's words, ending with the Prayer of St. Francis.

Trusting the God who surrounds us, nudges us and loves us, let us pray:

Holy God, as we seek to follow Jesus, and we seek to live with your love and compassion for our world, hear us as we pray silently

--For family members or friends in need. Lord hear our prayers.

--Now, truth telling God, hear us as we pray for someone we don't like or someone who doesn't like us. Lord hear our prayers.

--Hear us as we pray for the sick, the poor, the suffering, the hungry, the lonely, and those whom Jesus loves. Lord hear our prayers.

--Hear us as we pray for those in leadership positions in our world. Lord hear our prayers.

--Finally hear us as we pray for those most directly affected by current world problems and dangers. Lord hear our prayers. (p. 175)

--We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, using the Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make us instruments of your peace:

where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek  
 to be consoled as to console,  
 to be understood as to understand,  
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,  
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(see p. 171 for prayer as it was written; this version is adapted for a group)