

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 16, 2019, The 6^h Sunday of Epiphany/The 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

VALENTINES FROM THE HEART

“Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!”

Depending on when you grew up, you first met Superman in the pages of your comic books, or on the radio, or serialized into episodes when you went to the movies, or television shows or in cartoons, or in full-length movies. Whether you got to know Superman in the 1940’s or the 2000’s, didn’t you want some of his superpowers?

How many of us didn’t long to have x-ray vision, or the ability to hear and see at great distances, or his super-human strength, or if you were like me—didn’t you wish you could fly?

What you may not have known before coming to church this morning is that you do have more power than you thought.

You have the power to act, without actually touching another person.

You have the power to destroy without moving a single muscle,

You have the power to break the 10 commandments without getting out of your chair.

You have the power to murder or destroy another person,

and at first, they might not even know it.

Your words have the power to maim and crush another person,

and you don’t even have to be in the same room with them.

You can steal from another person, without even walking out your front door.

In this morning’s reading from Matthew we hear Jesus take the Ten Commandments and turn them upside down and inside out.

Jesus says that our thoughts are the same as our actions.

Our hatred and anger against another person will be judged as strongly as if we’d murdered them.

Our lust for another person will be judged the same as having an affair with them.

Our words that we shout at another person are as destructive as if we’d actually hit them,

and we’ll be held accountable.

Our hatred for those who are against us, or those who are unlike us, or those we consider enemies, or those who disagree with our version of truth, will be judged as if we actually killed them.

When we long to steal something someone else has,

it’s the same as actually walking into their house and taking it.

We are very powerful people.

This morning God gives us the same choice given to the Israelites long ago as they got ready to enter the Promised Land. It is the same choice every other follower of God has been given, leading up to us here in the sanctuary this morning, God says to you and to me:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in God’s ways,

and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances,
 then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you...
 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and
 serve them,

I declare to you today that you shall perish;
 you shall not live long in the land...

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today
 that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,
 loving the Lord your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God;
 for that means life to you and length of days.

God says to us:

"Choose life":

We have superpowers that start in our hearts, which are activated by:
 our words, our choices, our anger, our fears, our judgments,
 our divisions, our prejudices and our beliefs.

And we have superpowers that start in our hearts, which are activated by our:
 words, our choices, our prayers, our love, our strength and our courage,
 and our leaning on God's power to help us.

The Sermon on the Mount contains some of Jesus' most dangerous words because they ask
 us to pay attention and make choices daily, and there is incredible power in our choices.

This isn't about being nice to other people, it is about the power we have inside us:
 the power to be life giving, or the power to be death dealing,
 the power to speak life, or the power to speak death,
 the power to act for life, or the power to act for death.

And these choices aren't usually made in big life shattering moments,
 But in the midst of living the day to day of family, friends, people we go to school with, co-workers and
 neighbors.

This is about living in our families, including that one relative that makes everyone groan
 when you hear they are coming to dinner.

This means going to work every day and living with the co-workers that make us the craziest.

Do we deal them life or deal them death with what is going on inside ourselves?

Do our words maim them, or encourage them?

Do we respect them or have an affair with them based on what is going on inside
 ourselves?

Jesus tells us that we have so much power inside ourselves, and God is paying attention to
 how we use that power.

So how are we going to treat that neighbor who always throws her leaves onto our side of the
 fence, or who refuses to remove his fair share of the snow between your houses?

What is going to happen this afternoon when you spend time with your husband or wife or partner and they got on your very last nerve yesterday, not to mention this morning?

What are you going to do when you start talking politics with that person who is clearly wrong about almost everything? And they just won't listen to reason.

What are you going to feel and say and do Tuesday at school when you see that kid you don't like, or that person who broke your best friend's heart and you've been hating him or her together?

What are you going to do today after church when you bump into that person who grates on your nerves, or who doesn't do things the way you would do them if you were still in charge?

We are powerful people. And learning to use that power takes a lot of practice. It also takes relying on God's guidance and looking at people with different eyes.

I read a book about seeing with different eyes quite a few years ago, and just reread it this week. I've always found that there is a lot of life and truth in children's book. This one is called *Moon Over Manifest* and it's the story of Abilene Tucker who is 12 years old in the midst of the Depression. She's been riding the rails with her father most of her life.

She is the narrator of her life story and introduces herself saying:

We'd lived in a lot of places. Barns, abandoned railroad cars, even Hoovervilles, the shack towns for folks with no money, named for the president before the one we got now, who didn't seem to know that the country was in hard times. So I was prepared for anything. (p. 18, by Clare Vanderpool)

The anything she is ready for is being sent to live with a friend of her father's in Manifest, Kansas, while her dad works on the railroad for the summer. Abilene is a tired traveler who thinks she's seen it all, in all the places she and her dad have lived. The way she copes with all the change in her life is her list of Universals. She is convinced that so much about people and places is always the same. With her list of universals, she knows what to expect.

The day she starts school she says: *You'd have thought I'd be used to this by now. Being the new kid and all. I'd been through this umpteen times before but it never gets any easier. Still, there's certain things every school's got, same as any other. Universals, I call them. Walking into the schoolhouse, I smelled the familiar chalky air. Heard fidgety feet rustling under desks. Felt the stares. I took a seat near the back.*

My only consolation was that I knew these kids. Even if they didn't know me. Kids are universals too, in a way. Every school has the ones who think they're a little better than everybody else and the ones who are a little poorer than everybody else. And somewhere in the mix there's usually ones who are pretty decent. Those were the ones who made it hard to leave when the time came. And sooner or later, it always came. (p. 26)

If you want to read a book that captures the Depression through the eyes of a child, I highly recommend this book. I also recommend it because of the changes that Abilene Tucker goes through. In the midst of her story she's realized her list of Universals isn't working like it used to. She says: *I thought I knew a thing or two about people. Even had my list of universals. But I wondered. Maybe the world wasn't made of universals that could be summed up in neat little packages. Maybe there were just people. People who were tired and hurt and lonely and kind in their own way and their own time. (p. 144)*

If we can get to the same place as Abilene Tucker, I believe we are on the road to living out the Sermon on the Mount. The only way to use our power as God calls us to do, is to see the people in our lives with God's eyes. When we practice using God's heart to define the people around us then the people we have the power to maim, wound and destroy with our thoughts, words and actions suddenly become "*People who (are) tired and hurt and lonely and kind in their own way and their own time.*"

If we know our power and look with God's eyes and heart, it will change how we deal with the people around us.

I was reminded of this by a poem that came into my email this week written by the Rev. Thom Shuman, whose worship liturgy we often use. Every day he writes a new poem, and this is poem number forty-five. He begins with a quote from Romans 13:10a

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor;" Romans 13:10a
 that neighbor whose
 yard signs drive us nuts;
 whose political views
 send chills down our spines;
 who is always ready
 for an argument
 at the drop of a red hat?
 imagine our surprise
 when they are the ones
 dropping off casseroles
 after surgeries,
 mowing lawns while
 we are out of town;
 slipping a valentine
 into our mailbox
 when we are not looking. --© 2020 Thom M. Shuman

We are powerful people. We have the power to look past our own list of Universals to the people around us and really see them.

If we choose to see with God's eyes, and act and speak with God's heart,
 then we really will have superpowers:

Jesus says to us this day:

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
 Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,
 loving the Lord your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God;
 for that means life to you and length of days."

"Faster than a speeding bullet.
 More powerful than a locomotive.
 Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.
 Look! It's a bird. It's a plane. It's YOU!"

Vanderpoole, Clare, *Moon Over Manifest*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2010.