

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 16, 2018, The 17th Sunday After Pentecost/The 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38

“WHAT WE HOLD IN OUR HANDS”

Think for a minute about the things you hold in your hands daily.

We hold our phones, our children, the faces of our loved ones, our wallets, our TV remotes, our golf clubs, our backpacks, our basketballs and baseballs, our music, our games, our texts and tweets, our Bibles and devotional books, our schoolbooks, our to-do lists, the hands of our loved ones, our work and hobby tools, we hold our groceries, our toothbrushes, our medications, our credit and debit cards, and our tablets and I-pods and good old fashioned books.

We hold the basic tools of our lives,
 we hold the people we love,
 we hold many things that show who we are,
 what is important to us,
 what we love,
 and how we like to spend our time

And then we come to this morning’s story in Mark’s gospel
 and Jesus asks us to hold onto something very different.
 Jesus asks us to follow him and pick up our cross.

“Pick up your cross” is a phrase that Christians have used through the centuries, but when Jesus said this to his disciples the first time, they would have been shocked.

We are so far removed from what the cross was in Jesus’ time. Today, crosses decorate our churches, our Bibles, our necklaces. Here at First Presbyterian we have a cross on the Communion Table, outside in our garden, and on some of our stained glass windows. Our children make crosses in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.

It is a symbol now of Jesus’ love for us.

But when Jesus stood with his disciples in the town of Caesarea Philippi and told them that the Messiah that they had been following,
 the Messiah that they had longed for,
 the Messiah who was their teacher and friend,
 the Messiah who had healed people and changed lives all around the Galilee region
 was going to suffer.

They would have been shocked.

When Jesus told them that not only was he going to suffer,
 but the religious teachers and leaders of his day would reject him,
 and he was going to be killed on the cross
 and in three days rise from death
 they would have been horrified.

The cross was not the symbol it is for us today. It was a horrible instrument of the Roman government's torture and death. It was a shameful way to die, reserved for criminals and those who opposed Rome. The cross was a painful, terrifying way to die. It was the way of shame.

The Jews had been longing for a Messiah who would conquer Rome and all who opposed Israel. They had believed that the Messiah would bring new life and power to Israel. The Messiah was to be a conquering hero.

But now Jesus, who they believed to be the Messiah, was telling them that he was the Messiah who would suffer for his people, he was the Messiah whose message of love and inclusion and care for the poor would bring his death, he was not a conquering hero in any traditional sense.

No wonder Peter began to yell at him and tell him to stop this nonsense. Jesus was not talking about the kind of Messiah they expected at all.

But Jesus comes right back at Peter and says you are tempting me by focusing on human ways of thinking, and I am telling you God's ways of thinking and God's plan.

Jesus the Messiah doesn't fit within traditional expectations.

And then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to the disciples saying:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who loves their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

These words weren't easy to hear then, and they are not easy to hear now. To follow Jesus means denying ourselves and picking up the cross.

This was not the kind of Messiah that his first followers wanted,
and if we're honest is this the kind of Messiah we want?

He asks a lot of us, and he wasn't predictable then and he isn't predictable now.

They wanted a politically and militarily powerful Messiah,
and they got a Messiah who went the way of suffering.

They wanted a Messiah within their religious tradition
and they got a Messiah who broke with the religious traditions that hurt people,

They wanted a Messiah who was predictable
and they got a Messiah who ate with tax collectors,
and pardoned sinners,
and talked to the outcasts and women and children,
and broke long-held rules to show love and acceptance and inclusion in the family of God.

Our Messiah hasn't changed.

He still goes the way of suffering,
He still breaks with religious traditions that hurt people.

He still cares for the poor.

He welcomes those on the fringes, those we turn from, those we don't think belong
to show love and acceptance and inclusion in the family of God.

And what we hear from Jesus our Messiah this morning is that he is calling us to that same path.

This brings us back to the list I started this sermon with, the list of all the things we hold in our hands.

Jesus says to us: If you want to be my followers deny yourself and pick up your cross.

But we have all these things in our hands, how can we reach for the cross?

We hold the basic tools of our lives,
we hold the people we love,
we hold many things that show who we are,
what is important to us,
what we love,
and how we like to spend our time.

Does denying ourselves mean setting down the things that are most important to us?
Who are we if we aren't holding onto the people and things that define who we are?

What happens if our hands are empty and we are reaching out for the cross, so we can be followers of Jesus?

That's the difficulty with our Messiah Jesus, he asks so much of us.
He asks us to be like him.

He asks us to choose the way of serving others,
of reaching out to those in need,
of welcoming those no one else welcomes,
of speaking love when the world speaks hate,
of choosing justice when the world chooses power,
of seeing each other with God's eyes, and God's heart.

Jesus calls us to choose the way of the cross, the sacrificial way of love
before we pick up all the other things that fill our hands and hearts and lives.

We are being asked to pick up our cross by the one who went to the cross for us.
It is the voice of love that is calling us to follow.

It is our Messiah's voice of love that is asking us to make his way our priority.
It is our Messiah who lovingly holds our lives in his hands,
who asks us to look at what we hold in our hands,
and then pick up his way and follow.

I'd like to conclude by asking you to look at your hands as you listen to these words from St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic in Avila, Spain:

"Christ has no body now but yours;
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world;
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good;

Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, Yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, You are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours."

---St. Teresa of Avila