

The Way of Love

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 5, 2018

II Samuel 11:26-12:13a, Psalm 51:1-12, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 6:24-35.

I mentioned in Thursday's email our nave renovations have become a metaphor for me. It is the same space where God has been worshipped and the gospel proclaimed for decades. But a new covering on the cushions and floors affects how the whole space looks to us and lets us see something old in a new way.

And for the writer of Ephesians the good news of Jesus was like a new covering on the whole work of God, a way of seeing and understanding what God had been doing from the beginning.

Ephesians is one of those debated letters of the New Testament. Some think Paul wrote it. Some think it was written by someone who wanted to sound like Paul. It may or may not have been written for the church in Ephesus. The earliest manuscripts actually leave the address blank – From Paul to the saints who are in _____. That has led some to suggest it may have been a circular letter passed from church to church, intended for a wide audience. Even down to today.

This theory makes some sense because this letter lays out the heart of the gospel. Ephesians contains that great verse about Jesus breaking down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles and all people.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

That's from Ephesians 2. Ephesians 3 goes on to explain that this unity of all people was God's plan from the beginning. The writer declared

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me ... to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

In other words, what God did in Christ was both new and not new. God had always been working to heal and reconcile all things. The cross was the new cover on the old work of God. In the cross God ended human division and made the saving work of God visible to the whole world.

Then the writer erupted in prayer for the saints. We read this last week, from the end of chapter 3.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

So now, in response to all of this overflowing, healing, redemptive love, the writer spoke in chapter 4 with a heartfelt request. It was not quite a command, but surely a sincere and hopeful plea.

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

We don't have a recording of the writer saying these words. We don't know tone of voice. These words might sound to some like shaming parent voice. "You were raised better than this. Shape up. Lead a life worthy of the calling."

But I don't think shame was the intent. The goal was urgency. Like Princess Leia saying, "Help me, Obi Wan, you're my only hope". I beg you. In view of all God has done for us, in view of the vastness of God's love and mercy and care, recognizing that all of this love and hope come to us as sheer gift, please, for the love of God, lead a life worthy of the calling.

The writer begged them because it appears, sadly, that the early church was in danger of being torn apart, not just in Ephesus but in many places. The text hints at the challenges. There was the challenge to proclaim unity in a society that prized division. There was competition within the body over different gifts, with some valuing certain gifts over others. And it sounds as if some were acting like children, blown about by changing ideas, vulnerable to deceit and scheming. Things haven't changed much, have they.

So the writer begged them to come together and live lives worthy of the calling, lives of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, unity, peace. To a church in danger of being torn apart, in a chaotic time in history, the writer of Ephesians reminded the saints to stay together and live like followers of Jesus.

Which brings me to the Way of Love handout in your bulletins.

A version of this was distributed at the opening worship service of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church a few weeks ago in Austin. I was so grateful to be there. Presiding Bishop Curry preached, probably his biggest sermon since the Royal Wedding. In his sermon, Bishop Curry explained that this resource came together in response to a question he heard often in his ministry and had heard even that week from young people at General Convention. Bishop Curry had described in the wedding sermon what the world looks like when Love is the Way. So someone asked, "How do we follow Jesus in the way of love in a world that is profoundly unloving?"

That's what this handout is about. Bishop Curry explained it this way. I'm quoting now from his sermon.

"Several months ago, I invited a group of Episcopalians, clergy, laity, bishops, ... if they would just come and spend just a little bit of time to help me think and pray through how do we help

our church to go deeper as the Jesus Movement ... How do we help our folk to throw themselves into the arms of Jesus? How do you help me to do that? 'Cause I know when we do it, and abide in him, we will bear fruit we never imagined...

“And so we sat down, we met in the Atlanta airport, cause that was kinda easy, an easy place to be. We met in the Atlanta airport and we just kinda locked up, said Holy Eucharist, said our prayers, and just looked at each other – we didn’t do any wining and dining in Atlanta. We didn’t go to Underground Atlanta. We didn’t get any Paschal’s fried chicken, ... we just stayed there and just kept engaging... and finally we realized something, we didn’t need to come up with a new program for the church. We got programs and there’s nothing wrong, but we don’t need a new program... We realized that – wait a minute, we don’t have to do anything new!

“And we realized that we already have what we need in the tradition of the church going back centuries. For centuries monastic communities and religious communities and people of faith who have gone deeper in this faith have lived by what they often call a rule of life; a set of spiritual practices that they make a commitment to live in, practices that help them open up the soul, open up the spirit, help them find their way, a way of throwing yourself into the arms of God.”

The Way of Love came out of that. It is a new cover on an old truth. It is our rule of life as Christians. This is how we live the way of love in a world that is so profoundly unloving.

We turn from the unloving life and choose to follow Jesus.

We learn, especially the scriptures and the life and teaching of Jesus.

We pray, dwelling intentionally with God each day.

We worship, gathering with others to give thanks to God and be nourished by the sacraments.

We bless, giving what we have received, sharing our faith with others, serving in the name of Jesus.

We go, crossing boundaries of geography and social group and mindset to meet Jesus in other people.

And we rest, receiving the gift of God’s peace and wholeness.

This is not new. It is a new cover on our old, old faith, a way to see and understand something the church has always known. And as Bishop Curry shared this way in the opening Eucharist of General Convention, I realized something. Not only is this not new for the Episcopal Church. It is not new for St. Thomas. For sixty years this community has called people to turn and follow Jesus. This community has helped people learn the scriptures and deepen the life of prayer. This community has worshipped the Lord in beauty and holiness. This community has blessed others and crossed boundaries. And this community rests in fellowship and love for one another. All of the things we do together as a congregation, the ministries we share here and the gifts we give to others – they all fit into this pattern.

So beginning next week we'll invite you to start thinking about ways to commit yourself to this Way of Love. Every year around this time we invite ministry pledges for the coming year, ways we will all serve and lead over the next twelve months. When we start presenting these opportunities to get involved in ministries of St. Thomas, you'll see that they are organized in these categories. Do not sign up for everything. Be discerning and think and pray about where God wants you to serve over this next season. But do try to consider something from each category or most of the categories. Do consider how you will turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, and rest and walk in the Way of Love.

What the writer of Ephesians said to the early church, Jesus says to us all.

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

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To learn more about The Way of Love visit <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>

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