

Happy Fathers Day!

June 21, 2020

UMC Geneva

Happy Fathers Day! It seems like it was just yesterday that we were celebrating our Mothers. Pastor Becky Nicol preached on Mother's Day. (1) And a theme throughout her sermon was that Mothers, like God, take the long view of life. She shared how her Mother lived this out. Pastor Becky's text for the day was Psalm 31 – a Psalm of Lament – a prayer for help in times of trouble. She showed how that Psalm speaks to us today and our current experiences as “we alternate between cries for help, expressions of pain and fear, and trust and praise.” In short, she encouraged us to be like Mothers, and God, who take the long view of life. Those who do so will find strength and hope, trusting God in the midst of life's difficulties.

Today's Gospel lesson encourages us, I believe, to take the short view of life. It speaks of looking around, now, to see the opportunities that are ripe and ready for us to make a difference for God and for good in our world, our community, our church and our homes! In Matthew 13, Jesus uses the metaphor of the harvest, and encourages us to look around and see that “the fields are ripe and ready for harvest.” And he challenges us—all of us—to seize the moment, right now, to live for God...to not just “do our own thing” but to be mindful, to consider where God is at work, and how we—you and I--can join God in what God is up to today in the world and in our lives.

A few weeks ago, when I first saw that I would be preaching from today's passage, I chuckled because I was immediately reminded of my Dad. This was one of my Father's favorite preaching passages. It reminded me of those year-long furloughs Mom and Dad would take from their missionary work in West Africa. While in the States, they would “itinerate.” As Methodists, we know what it means for Pastors to itinerate. We call it the “itineracy system”—as clergy, we covenant to move from church to church at the direction of our Bishop. (This week, Pastor Esther will be itinerating from Geneva to Deerfield to serve the Lord there, and Pastor Lisa Telomen will be itinerating from LaGrange to Geneva to begin her ministry with us here.)

My folks were not Methodists, but they were expected to itinerate during their furloughs...to visit every one of their supporting churches scattered throughout the mid-West and along the East coast. This was an opportunity to thank their supporters, to share evidence of their work, and for Dad to preach in worship. As children, we'd have to listen to the same sermon, over and over again, in every church we visited – Dad's missionary sermon about the “fields white unto harvest.” We heard that message so many times that, well, we had it committed to memory. Rest assured...I'm not going to repeat his sermon here! But I would like to share a couple of gems from today's Gospel lesson that are appropriate for Fathers today.

I believe today's passage asks two fundamental questions of Fathers – and all of us. The first question is: “Where are you looking?” Matthew's version of this story says, “When Jesus saw the crowds, *he* had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Where was Jesus looking? At the crowds...at the people, right there, right in front of him. His gaze was on others! On others he encountered every day. On others

who were hurting and in need – on the everyday people who were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Interestingly, we find another version of this story in John’s Gospel, chapter 4, where Jesus exhorts *his disciples* to follow his example. He tells them, “*Open* your eyes! Open your eyes and look at the fields ripened for harvest!” Some English versions of the Bible translate the phrase differently with Jesus saying, “*Lift up* your eyes and look.” Either way you put it, if your eyes are closed...open them, or if you’re looking down...look up and see.

So, for us fathers, and father-figures, we need to ask ourselves, “Where are we looking?” Are we looking down, narrowly focused on ourselves, our work, our interests, our concerns? Are our eyes closed to the needs of those around us? Are our eyes closed to the needs of family members? Our spouses or significant others? Our children and grand-children? Are we so self-focused that we can’t see or aren’t seeing the people right in front of us at work, or in our community, who need compassion—our compassion? Who need our help? Jesus encourages us to open our eyes and take the short view...to see those in our immediate purview who need our help now!

Question number 2: “What are you looking for?” Fact is, we tend to see the things we look for in life. Dads...father-figures...each one of you...what are you looking for in life? What do you want to get out of life? John’s story places Jesus and his disciples in Samaria. So-called “enemy” territory! In John 4, what are the disciples looking for? Food! They’re hungry, so they head into a nearby Samaritan village to catch a bite to eat. They weren’t concerned with the Samaritans. There’s no indication they cared about Samaritans. But where’s Jesus? He has stayed, alone, on the outskirts of town, in the burning sun. He’s thirsty, standing by a well. And who comes along? The village outcast! A Samaritan woman who had three strikes against her: She was female in a patriarchal culture...she was a hated Samaritan...and she was considered “impure” (having been divorced 5 times and now living with a 6th man). Most Jews, most men, wouldn’t have even seen her! She was one of the invisible ones in society. But, as you know...Jesus saw her...Jesus spoke with her...Jesus gladly accepted the water she drew from the well...and Jesus shared eternal life with her, “the water that never runs dry” ...Eternal life—meaningful life...a restored life of reconciliation both with God and her neighbors. A life devoted to sharing the Gospel, the Good News. She was one of the first evangelists!

Who are the invisible ones in our communities today? In our nation? Think about that with me for a few moments today. If nothing else, the crises of the past few months have pulled back the curtains, bringing into the light of day members of our society who in so many ways have been invisible...gone unseen by many of us. The health crisis starting with Covid. The economic crisis following in its wake. Misplaced prejudice and discrimination against Asians who’ve been blamed for Covid. Violence, even murder, of persons of color by police across our nation. The unjust treatment of Navajo Native Americans woefully underserved by our inadequate, unfair health care system. Suddenly, whole categories of “invisible” people have come to light, have been exposed to the light of day. Jesus comes to us today and says, “Wake up! Look up! Open

your eyes! Take the short view! You're surrounded by needy people, right now. See them! Have compassion. Reach out and do something to help!"

But there's another dimension to the question, "What are you looking for?" As you look at members of your family...what are you looking for? As you look to the church...what are you looking for? Your colleagues at work? Neighbors and friends? What do you look for? Are you looking for "deficiencies?" For what's gone "wrong?" For "short-comings" and "failures?" Is yours a negative, scarcity mentality that sees the glass half empty? Or is yours a positive, abundance mentality that sees the glass half full, filled with potential? I encourage us to look out with an appreciative eye, an eye—an outlook—that will transform us. Instead of focusing attention on what's wrong, what's broken, and on weaknesses, let's cultivate an eye of appreciation—a God's-eye view—that can surface and see the true...the good...the better...the possible in ourselves and others. Let's live into that vision – God's vision. Amen

Rev. Rich Darr – Pastor, UMC Geneva IL

(1) Rev. Becky Nicol, Mother's Day Sermon, *A Mother's Faith*, UMC Geneva, IL, May 10, 2020.