

Love Forward – September 11, 2016

Scripture readings

- Exodus 32:7-14 – Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind ...
- Psalm 51:1-11 – Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness
- 1 Timothy 1:12-17 – I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord ... [who] came into the world to save sinners ...
- Luke 15:1-10 – “Which of you ... does not leave the ninety-nine ... and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ... Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep.

Sermon Notes

Sometimes I have to remind myself – especially today, the anniversary of 9/11 – that the God we pray to and come to celebrate and worship is the same God who transformed death into life. There is hope, as Paul says in his letter to Timothy, that through God’s mercy any of us can be changed, the world can be changed. In as much as there is evil, hatred, pain and death in this world, we are called to be ambassadors of love. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said it well: “Yes, bad things happen. And God is still God. And we are part of the Jesus Movement.” We are to have a sense of horizon, love as we have been loved, and begin to pass that love forward.

I have some stories to share with you. Many are about gestures of kindness, even hope. I invite you to sit with them, consider how they make you feel, what they make you think of. Consider, perhaps, how these gestures might call us into something more, something bigger than ourselves.

- A lady walked into Starbucks one morning at 7am and paid for her coffee and also the person’s behind her. Finally one man decided he didn’t want to do that. He said, “No, I’ll just take my free coffee and go.” That was at 6pm - three hundred and seventy-eight people later.
- The executive director of a nonprofit serving youth and families stopped by his office on his day off. He saw a couple waiting to be helped, carrying a bag, but rushed by them because he was in a hurry and just wanted to pick up some mail. But he stopped himself and went back to them, asking, “How may I help you?” They said, “We were here several years ago. Separately, the two of us were put in a homeless shelter where we met and fell in love. We’ve been married 4 years now, and we’re so grateful for the help you gave us. We brought this bag of clothes for others in need.”
- According to the National School Supply and Equipment Association, 77% of all teachers pay for their own school supplies. 77%! A group of folks decided that should be no more, and they began to link donors with teachers. 14,000 teachers signed up for help, and 10,000 donors were matched with them to provide all the supplies they needed for the entire school year. The program is still growing.
- A police officer patrolling in a small town in Michigan pulled over a lady whose five-year-old son was running around in the backseat looking out the window and waving at the cop. The officer said to the woman, “Ma’am, your child has to be in a car seat.” She said, “Sir, I don’t have a car seat. I can’t afford one.” The officer led the woman with lights flashing to the nearest Walmart and spent \$50 for a car seat. He said, “It’s the best \$50 I ever spent.”
- A fatherless eight-year-old boy found a \$20 bill in the parking lot of a Cracker Barrel restaurant. While he was eating with his mom and sister, he saw a soldier come in to eat. The boy put the \$20 he’d found in an envelope, wrote a note and left the envelope on the soldier’s car. The note said, *Thank you for all you do. I want you to have this money.* The note was signed, *From a gold star kid.* From that gesture began a nonprofit called the Power of 20, which seeks to pass forward small increments of cash to those in need.

- Finally – there’s a pizza place in Philadelphia, a city that is dealing with a huge homeless population. The guy who runs this pizza place started a program where folks who come there to eat can pay an extra dollar and write a sticky note to put on a wall. A homeless person can come in, grab one of those sticky notes and redeem it for a slice of pizza.

Certainly these stories, these gestures of kindness and hope, are moving for us and might even restore our faith in humanity. We can all be agents of kindness in this world and pay it forward. But maybe there’s even more we are called to. Perhaps we, you and I, the whole world even, are being called to something bigger than gestures of kindness and hope. Perhaps we are called to acts of love, igniting our faith in God, and moving love forward.

Our gospel this morning is from Luke, the physician, who certainly knows how to keep our attention with a good story. The story of Jesus telling these two parables draws us in but it also calls us into not just what life is, but also calls us into what the kingdom of God is, what God’s love looks like for each of us. The first parable is about this crazy old shepherd who leaves his flock, which is not safe and sound in the fold, but exposed in the wilderness. Despite the danger to his ninety-nine sheep, he leaves them to go out and look for the one that is lost. That’s not just crazy, it’s reckless and irresponsible and radical to risk everything for just one sheep. Unless of course, that one sheep is you. That’ll change the way you hear Psalm 23! “The Lord is MY shepherd,” (thanks be to God). The parable is a story about how God loves us in his kingdom, and it’s not safe at all. It’s reckless, radical, and downright risky. And we are each, as lost as we are, fully dependent on God’s crazy love for us.

And then there’s the parable of the lost coin. A woman has ten coins, the equivalent of ten days worth of food for her. As a woman in the 1st century, she cannot provide for her own means. So when one coin is lost, she is desperate to find it again and searches everywhere, uncovering things and sweeping in corners, looking high and low. Then, when the coin is found, there’s a great party, which is also crazy. It’s extravagant, wasteful, profligate even. But this is a story about what it means to be lost and about the joy of finding and being found. So we rejoice!

On a day like today – that lives in pain and remembrance for so many– maybe what we need as a country and as a faith community is something that calls us back into the movement that is love in this world. It calls us to do things differently, maybe even a little bit crazy. So today we will not pass the offering plates. We’re doing something different, very different, as different as God’s love for us is than anything we’ve every known. Know that what we do here today we do in hope. Yes, there is risk, but it’s a kind of risk that can only be taken in love for God’s people. The risk, the cost for us, is not too much to bear. It asks us to seek and to find, to reach out to the lost and to witness to the power of loving forward, as God loves.

We are made for this, you and I. Presiding Bishop Curry is right. We are part of the Jesus Movement. We are made to transform the pain and suffering and loss and tears of the world into something of beauty and life, and into great rejoicing. Maybe that takes a little craziness. My hope, in what we begin today, is that you will experience the crazy, radical, reckless, maybe even irresponsible love of God as you go and find someone, something, to love as God loves, to love as a giver of life – as you hold the pain of the world and also witness to the love of God for it.

Today, we are asking you to love forward.

[Note: If you were not with us in church on September 11, 2016, we invite you to read about our LoveForward movement at the following link.]

<http://www.stpaulslakewood.org/love-forward>