

Sermon for 5 February 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112: 1-10 (UMH 833); 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

“Good grief”

Listen to me now!

Not only will you hear me get exposed for groaning about Bible verses that talk in circles, like Isaiah, , or state the obvious, like the psalm, or (in Jesus' case) unfairly criticize people ... but the week has gone by and all the interesting thoughts I had on Monday disappeared when I actually tried to produce a sermon Friday night!

All I could think of was the double meaning of the phrase, “Good grief.”

All the ways belonging to church help me and also exasperate me.

‘Good grief!’ I said, when I read Bible texts that said everything works out fine for believers. Psalm 112 says that; and while I know there are plenty of times when being reminded of that, repeating that to myself, and putting my faith in that literally got me through the day, or night ... I’ve also surely listened to that being said or sung or read in church when it was just boring, or hypocritical, or lazy, it seemed to me.

“Good grief” is also a hard truth that we all learn over and over. Isaiah pointed that out, speaking for God, when they complained about how hard it was to put Jerusalem back together after Cyrus allowed them to return from 70 years of Babylonian captivity. If you don’t fold the laundry, you end up with a mess and confusion and embarrassment and ... on and on; and if the horror of war and the shame of crime didn’t finally get so bad we just had to stop them, we never would get out of our terrible human fixes. One of the signs of hope I’ve seen recently right here in our brief hours together; is during our “Joys and Concerns,” when we give vent to what’s making us mad and scaring us, until somehow, somebody or some turn of the liturgy confronts us with the hard fact that Jesus loved criminals and focused on healing cripples and said little children had more sense than grown-ups ... and we’ve suddenly realized we’ve just said exactly what the other guy was saying, the one we’d been bad-mouthing, and “God help us all” was bigger than anything else in the room. We began with complaining, and end up confessing. That’s hard to take. Good grief hurts as it slowly but surely helps, when friends share it together.

So I’m really not saying anything new. Just the same sweet hardship you came in with. Just the same incredible idea that improves your outlook this time, please God, let it be so I want to know Jesus. I want to sit with him at table before I go back to What is it? The way of truth and patience that I can hardly believe rules the world and all that is and ever shall be... Jesus, we call him.

Grief, and good, all mixed up in one city we love, and one family we belong to, and one grace we trust beyond anything else we ever tried. A mystery, for sure. My Friend. My love. My ancestor. My precious child. God, in our midst.

How do I preach that?

You go out. That's what you're here for. Bandaged up. Suited up. Reminded. Prepared. Such small things. They mean the world to someone you will meet this week. Just a tone in your voice. Just a chuckle, or a word .. or a thought that comes to you in the midst of someone's pain you can see without their telling you. Just a reminder that kept you brave, even if you were scared, when it mattered more than you expected it to... and now it's your turn, to be Jesus, just like the disciples.

Alive. One body. Healing the world.

Grief. Good. Go.

Amen.