

Sermon for 7 March 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Third Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19 (UMH750, Response 1); 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

“The way...”

We're barely half-way through Lent, and the Church can't wait to get us into an argument.

“Thou shalt not covet.” Half our economy is based on making us want what we don't have!

“Thou shalt not kill.” What's the biggest item in our national budget? War-machinery and war-training..

Then today our texts end with Jesus turning over the furniture during worship, making honorable, law-abiding suppliers run for cover, and upsetting regular public services.

This is no quiet, soul-searching retreat we're on. This Lent business is head-on confrontation.

Honestly, it's kind of a relief. We've been knowing our treatment of the stranger @ our national borders is dead-on contrary to what we say every Sunday about the foreigner, and our own background. The poor? Our basic business model is selfishness ... and as Henry Ford said, “The business of this country is business.” We say helping people makes them lazy ... yet lately we've been throwing money around with almost no system, just to push the joblessness issue another month or two down the road. And finally ... finally ... this year, this decade, this spring and summer and fall, we're hearing, and listening, and speaking up, about the awful, soul-searing, nation-warping abuse of race relations. It's out there. We have a chance. Put away our guns and bigotry and sit down and reason together for a healing like no other in history...

And don't get me started on global warming or nuclear weaponry and the incredible opportunity we have all over the world to negotiate, and renegotiate, and NOT SHOOT and NOT BOMB and NOT SANCTION, not act like four-year-olds over and over and over... and the fact that the Bible pays far too little attention to the goodness of God in nature, and the responsibility to cooperate with it rather than abuse and neglect and destroy it up to the point where the planet finally kicks back and overwhelms us human elements of its vastness.

What I see is not so much evil, although there's plenty of that in the daily news, as denial of fact.

Both Moses and Jesus are insisting we work together, focus on the common good, and be truthful, in church and outside as well.

And we know that. ...and it gives us nightmares that we don't seem to act on it, to fix things, to love one another by giving up trying to be in total control.

I've got a dear friend, I've known for nearly sixty years, who tells me if we'd just stick to the Bible in church, everything would be fine. When I question what he means, it sounds so close to what Jesus was running out of the temple, I can't stand it: Making an idol out of a book, taking poetry and turning it into law, making what was reasonable to a certain group of people for a certain period of time into rules set in stone, paying no attention to human development or discovery ... We have to follow God, and change our set ways when God's spirit reveals new patterns. Our United Methodist Church is risking the greatest opportunity of its existence in global missions, let alone the chance for kindness and loving relations here in the U.S., over something we've barely grasped in this past century What we call sexual identity... with a split because of a few verses from different times...

We're just escaped destruction of our national capitol by a mob incited by hate and foolishness; we're still keeping in office leaders who lie about our tested and tried and faithfully executed national elections.

And here in our own fellowship, we hunker down and don't try, don't pray, don't use our God-given imaginations to explore what Jesus might be nudging and guiding us to explore in use of our building. We practice our faith as though it's not a group thing, just individual ... we shun meetings like the plague.

Lent gets us to the window, tells us to look out and see what love can do that hasn't been tried. Lent stands us before the mirror and says, "I have more for you. You're better than this. I have a song for you, and sails for you to unfurl. Listen! Look! Come back next week and love one another in a new way. This is my body, this group I've called together. Exercise it. Go this way ..."

I don't know where we're headed. At my age, it's all guess-work. And that, I believe, is the secret of faith, hope, and love in Jesus: "Follow me! See what happens. I will be with you... Listen... I love you..."

In Jesus' name I speak what seems to me the truth of the way of God through Jesus Christ.

Amen.