

## Pastor's Message – 4/14/24

Acts 3:12-16

1 John 3:1-2, 5-7

As I mentioned earlier, the part of our Bible reading from Acts today begins just after Peter's healing of a lame man—and the people are amazed. Peter, sometimes loud-mouth and extroverted, sometimes denying that he even knew Jesus, uses this miracle as an opportunity to teach about Jesus—the risen Jesus—as being present and active even after Jesus has left the earth and ascended into heaven to join the Father again.

This is a bit of a troubling passage in that, it through what we know as Peter's second sermon, much of the New Testament, especially the gospel of John, blames Jesus' death on an unidentified group of people only as "the Jews" (see, for example, John 19:7, 12), which makes it sound like all Jewish people in the Roman outpost of Judea had turned against Jesus and helped to railroad his death.

The reading for today from Acts is from the early days of the church, with Peter speaking to a crowd in the temple that gathered in awe after he and John had healed a man who'd been lame from birth. Peter, addressing the crowd as "[you] People of Israel," took the opportunity to tell the listeners that it was not he and John, but God who was the real healer of the lame man.

But Peter did not stop there. He added that God "brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. <sup>14</sup> You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer." (vv. 13-15).

Peter really dishes out blame, and perhaps it's on target with some in his Jewish audience. It is altogether possible that some of those listening to him had been in the crowd that had yelled, "Crucify him!" when Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus (Mark 15:13-15). But Peter here lets Pilate off the hook and tells his audience (which likely also included people who'd had nothing to do with Jesus' death), "You killed the Author of life!"

As we read the rest of the story, we see that Peter's purpose was to lead his audience to repent of their sins. So, this "you killed Jesus" statement served as a way to jolt people into thinking about their overall

rebellion against God (v. 19). This is one side of revelation from the Bible today.

On the other side, unlike the crowd in the passage from Acts to whom Jesus' presence and power are just being revealed in Peter's demonstration and preaching, the people to whom John writes in his Letter are already members of the Christian community. Could that be us or do we belong with the crowd in Acts? The people to whom John writes do not fully realize the implications of God's presence with them, but they are called to live according to the love and hope they do know they have received. They are to live as the children of God they know themselves to be.

Both of these passages are about accountability: the cornerstone of healing and restoration in relationships. Peter's speech may sound harsh and full of blame to our sensitive contemporary ears, but there is still something for us to hear in his words. Peter tells his listeners that the healing they have witnessed happened because of God. At the same time, he chastises them for their role in rejecting God and God's grace. Do we not also witness God's presence and receive God's grace in the here and now, while at the same time, missing the mark in our relationships with each other and with God and failing to live completely as the children of God as John suggests we are?

We all make mistakes; we all sin; we all miss the mark of living out our call to love others as Jesus loves us. Peter recounts to the Israelites the scope of their mistake, in not seeing Jesus as the Messiah, and killing him. While we haven't really made this mistake in our lives — the crucifixion of Jesus — we have committed other crucifixions.

These are crucifixions that we need to repent for, that we need to seek forgiveness for, that we need to focus on not re-living, not allowing to recur. We, too, need to seek mercy and the grace of God.

I was talking to one of our Church members last week and they were relating the damage they had to their trees from that wet, heavy, spring snow we had. Which snowflake caused those branches to break? The first snowflake? The second? The 2,463<sup>rd</sup>? For some, it might be the first mistake, for others, it may be an accumulation. The theologian/philosopher used the analogy of snow on a barn roof. It accumulates until the roof joists creak from the strain. Then one more microscopic flake of snow becomes that one bit of weight too much and the roof caves in. So, in some people's lives, that one last event -- a tear, a loss, an epiphany -- brings about conversion.

Sinful tendencies beset us at every turn. Sometimes it is sin of action and commission; sometimes it is sin of omission and inaction. Another philosopher has said that if we aren't part of the solution, we are part of the problem. And only a power greater than our own can guide us through to safety at the other end. That power is ours through Jesus Christ. We won't be sinless in this life, if by "sin" we mean self-centeredness. IF, by "Sin" we mean the intentional disregard for all that's good and right and pure, then Yes! By grace the chains of sin that bind us are gone and we are set free.

In Christ, Paul tells us, we are a new creation. We have a new identity. We are no longer identified by sin. We are no longer trapped by sinful acts and thoughts. At the same time, John encourages us to work to rid ourselves of the sin that remains. And that in the power of the grace that comes from Christ, we can overcome thoughts and deeds and choose different paths and a different identity. God is not done with me yet might be a cliché, but it is also a truth that we can embrace, even as we seek to purify ourselves as he is pure. We are in process, and it is a shared process. We need one another to hold us accountable. We need the community to walk with us on this journey of purification—not for the purposes of judgment or condemnation, but for the purposes of encouragement and building up. That is why we are brought together into the body of believers so that together we can become more like Christ.

In his Letter, John reminds us that although we are blest to be called children of God, who we will actually become has yet to be revealed. We do not know exactly how God is working in our lives and in the life of our church and who we will be in the next year or 5 years or 10 or 150 years. We are a work in progress and "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." God is working with us every step of the way. God is at work in our lives—in the here and now and into the future. With God's help we can become who God leads us to become.

In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed and apple tree,  
in cocoons a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free.  
In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be.  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

Those who are born of him are indeed "children of God." All of this is at God's initiative, out of God's imagination, and through God's love.

“See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). But we aren't merely God's children now, John goes on to say. We are to imagine something more. “What we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is” (v. 2). In other words, the children of God are to imagine that they can and will become like Jesus, the perfect image of God!

To put it another way, the children of God are to imagine themselves in the person of Jesus Christ and act accordingly. Like children wrapping themselves in the garb of the saint they want to be, we are to “put on Christ,” as Paul imagines in Romans 13:14 and Galatians 3:27. As a child might imagine being a force for pure good in the world, children of God who imagine that they can be like Jesus also “are righteous, even as Christ is righteous” (1 John 3:7).

In God's love is our hope and promise. Even the things we do that mess up, even in a world that so often seems out to get us or a world that seems to be going to Hell in a handbasket, in a world that seems worse than it ever has been and can't get any worse, theologian John Calvin says, get turned to good by God. What a freeing word in our present pressure cooker American context, where many are just one paycheck or pink-slip (job-loss) or diagnosis away from financial ruin. The good that happens is God's work, not ours.

This is God's hope and desire for us. Through a relationship with Jesus Christ, we are children of God. He loves us even more than earthly parents love and cherish their children. As Max Lucado wrote, “If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning.” God loves us beyond our imagination: more than we can hope for or even imagine.

Some of you know that I play in a recorder consort and I and my fellow musicians play the music we're given. But the job of making sure the music sounds good, that good is done, is the director's job. I am certainly not a virtuoso recorder player and, I suspect, every one of us mess up and doesn't play the music perfectly, but we rehearse and practice and work at it and, eventually, by the director's instructions, we are able to put together and present an overall good performance. So it is that God the director of our lives does the good, not us.