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Luke 10:1-11,16-20
Isaiah 66:10-14
Psalm 66:1-9
Galatians 6:1-16

July 7, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

I want to begin this morning with a quote that caught my attention. It was written in 2012 by Charles Blow, a commentator for the New York Times, in response to political posturing and social agenda-making leading up to the presidential election of that year. He said, "One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient."

His comments were directed at political opinions that for him, seemed in opposition to what a nation built upon justice for all was supposed to be about. Blow struggled with the absence of compassion and empathy that he was witnessing; the lack of understanding and the inability to look at the world through anyone's perspective but one's own.

However, the point wasn't just about a lack of empathy. It was about the breakdown of civility; the deterioration of the common good and our eroding sense of what it means to be a united whole - where your personal "virtue" becomes a singular gauge of right and wrong, unbalanced, and unchecked by the needs of others.

"One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient."

Now...I work hard to not be overtly political from the pulpit. I don't think it's my place to choose sides or express my own personal views (even though you know I have them). I work to not express them in this place because I deeply respect each of you and understand that we will have a wide range of perspectives. Perspectives we have all thought carefully about. I also respect that at Grace we have built an incredible trust with one another...one that allows each person to be who they are and believe what they believe. That is an incredible gift that I hope you all know is special beyond measure. Because we know this isn't necessarily the norm outside of these walls.

My goal, therefore, is to insure that we work to not make the Gospel a political tool but a teaching tool. A source of inspiration, personal reflection, and communal action. Yet, as we wrestle with the Gospel, it's going to butt up against things that feel political. That's just the nature of what Jesus was doing.

So, take my comments this morning as teaching – not side taking or political posturing. I want our reflection to be a source of conversation and contemplation...of seeking a closer look at what Jesus calls us to do throughout history, and how we, as individuals living in 2019, are supposed to apply the Gospel to our lives today. That's always the task but in the political

climate we live in, in the divided nature of communities, as tensions grows, as distrust and apprehension of those who disagree with us seeps into our lives, we have to be seeking a better way.

For example...I listened carefully this past week at the anger and judgement that arose around the 4th of July celebration in Washington, DC. I am certain in this place today, we have a wide range of opinions as to the appropriateness of tanks and flyovers, of grand gestures of might and force, the message it sends to our country and abroad. Our opinions and perspectives come on the heels of ever increasing division in our nation. Everyone seems angry. Everyone has taken sides. Many of you feel hopeless, frustrated at the state of our diplomacy and our civility. Disheartened by the lack of understanding and the inability to listen to one another. I hear it day in and day out. I don't blame you if you are discouraged. Look at the news...there was even a KKK rally in Hanover County yesterday. Yesterday...right down the road. Hate is real. Division seems insurmountable.

So, what does the Gospel have to teach us?

It's hard to navigate the world we live in and so we think to ourselves...if only people would change. (How many times have we said that?) If only the arguing and hate and dissension would stop.

Maybe you are even left wondering...how do we find God in these troubled times? What are we, as Christians at Grace Church living in Goochland County supposed to do?

Well, when I start to wrestle with where God is in all of this, I am always comforted by the words from Luke 10, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." So, let's start there – with the question, how do we find God in troubled times. We are told that the kingdom of God has come near. God is ever present with us and in our communities. But this isn't a passive, God up in the clouds looking down at us kind of presence. It's so much more than that. It's an active and personal presence.

Here's how we know that is the case...

In Luke we see this active and personal God as Jesus is sending out 70 disciples. They are going out in pairs to the surrounding towns. As they go, they are given a couple of important instructions...first, they are told to take nothing with them, no purse or bag or even sandals. In other words...no gimmicks as they go out. Take just yourselves. Second, when they go to someone's home they are to start with good intentions...proclaim peace to this house. Start with hope and goodwill. Don't be fearful; don't doubt; don't judge. Begin with peace. Third, they are to spend time at each home, break bread, do good, help where they can. Be the active and personal kingdom of God for others. Finally, the disciples are told if their peace isn't met with peace in return, shake the dust off of your shoes and try again. Don't react in anger or disgust. This work is not about reactivity but about perseverance. So, persevere in doing what is right.

This is what the Gospel teaches us about how to find God in the face of one another, by doing good and seeking peace.

These are the instructions. There are a couple of important insights that we should all take to heart from what Jesus tells the 70.

The first is that peace starts with us...you and me. We are to be the bearers of God's kingdom on earth and this is a kingdom built upon peace, not destruction. Upon love, not hate. As Jesus sends out the 70, so we are sent today. Galatians reminds us that we are to bear one another's burdens in a spirit of gentleness. You can't do this work from a place of turmoil. Start with peace within your own heart. Set the example.

The second insight is this...Jesus had power beyond anything anyone could imagine. And, he offered this power to his disciples – they were so excited about their new found strength that they couldn't help shouting out that even demons would submit to them. Yet, in the midst of this great power, Jesus calls them to be humble. Go out simply. Go out with good intentions. Stated another way...with great power comes great humility. Might doesn't make right.

Paul is adamant in his letter to the church in Galatia that we are never to grow weary of doing what is right and doing right means that we work for the good of all. Peace be upon your house, and your house, and your house...all the way down the street for as long as it takes. Keep working for good.

Let's go back to our quote...

"One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient."

We may not be able to eliminate all of the hate and anger around us but we can start by practicing empathy and understanding. We can work for creating more peace, not doing more harm. Jesus calls each of us to go out offering peace, to persevere in doing good, and to be God's kingdom in a troubled world.

So we may not be able to change others...but we can be a light to one another. We may have to keep persevering when things seem hopeless but God has promised to be among us...in the love that we share and in the good that we do. So go out to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Amen.