

March 4, 2018

Third Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-22; Ephesians 2:4-22

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*Unity in Simplicity*

This past Tuesday we joined together to solve the world's problems. Well, the problems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's world, anyway. Costly grace. Living sacrificially, following Jesus' way to the cross. What he might say about issues of our day, we wondered. Great questions about personal belief, cultural life, and interfaith relations—is Jesus the only way? Bonhoeffer's writing got us into big churchy words like salvation, justification, sanctification—what's the difference between them all? That's when she smiled and said: You know, it just seems to me, faith is really quite simple, but sometimes we make it so complicated!

That stuck with me. Simplicity. What's the simple heart of our faith? How does it get complicated? You see, that's one way to understand Jesus chasing animal sellers and money changers from the temple. Sometimes this story gets read as an example of Jesus acting against injustice; and as inspiration for us to do the same in myriad ways today. There is truth in that connection. And there's something simpler; deeper.

Here's the backstory. For Jews, the Temple was the center of faith and culture for the whole nation. Walls demarcated concentric courtyards—first for Gentiles, then for Jews next level inside, and in the center the Holy of Holies where God's true presence abided and only the high priest entered. According to religious rules, to

worship one needed a sacrificial animal, unblemished. We're not bringing our own goat or bird walking as far as Battle Creek or Cadillac, because something might scar it on the way. Merchants offer the convenience of buying one when we arrive. And one more complication. Can't use common Roman money, because the emperor is on the coin. So other people help us exchange one currency for another. Imagine the noise and stench ... at Passover, the busiest time of year ... What's our worst Black Friday nightmare?!

I imagine it all began with positive meaning and motivation. Unblemished respect, like dressing in our Sunday-best. Rituals to move the heart, like hymns, baptism, communion help us feel God's love and empowered to live God's way of grace and peace in our world. Theological ideas to answer real questions and concerns, like justification and sanctification. Ancient Jews tried to hold onto their faith amid a hostile world. Hostile soldiers and spiritual practices threatened their way of life in family and community. Like Temple walls and courtyards, the Law guarded faith as they engaged the world around.

Except it all got too complicated. That's why Jesus cleansed the Temple. Rituals and beliefs to help feel close to God, actually made people feel more distant, not good enough, excluded, condemned. So help us God, however good our intent, we might wonder how people feel that about some expressions of our Christian faith, as well. Not at one with God, which is the simple central point, after all. And here's the other major complication with the Temple. Roman armies reduced it to rubble when Jews revolted 30 years after Jesus died. By the time John writes the Jesus story, they've dealt with this loss, confusion, disorientation for decades, shaken to the foundation of faith. That's where God is. But it's not there. So how do we come to know, to worship, to serve God now? Is God with us anymore? That central question shaped early Christian faith.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell this story at the end of Jesus' life and ministry. It's the climax of conflict. John begins with it, as a way to say: This is what all the other stories really mean. Jesus reveals that God's holy presence is not just in one building. God is with us everywhere we go, in everyone we meet, in everything we face. You see, Jesus is not really against the Temple. He's a faithful Jew. He's all for what the Temple really stands for—full intimate relationship with God ... in all of life, all the time. When he cleanses the temple and in everything else he did with people so often socially outcast, religiously imperfect, or physically blemished, Jesus helps people “come inside” to feel a Holy Presence, to be at one with God, and to find Sacred Purpose for life, without restrictions or exclusions.

Tear down this temple, Jesus said, and I will raise it up again. Could seem a threat. But from John's perspective with people of his day, maybe they heard a promise. Those temple walls never got rebuilt. Jesus means himself, building life together with him. You see, friends, John tries to tell us, we are the temple. As we build our relationships, our worship and myriad ways of service, God's loving presence abides, God's gracious power inspires and guides. We are the Body of the Risen Christ, as Paul said.

It's really quite simple. Living faith is all about loving God, as Jesus did, filling our hearts and minds and whole being with the Spirit. And loving others—neighbors, outcasts, even enemies, in the way Jesus did without exception or exclusion, fully, sacrificially. The Greatest Commandment. For me, it's that simple.

Yet, I fear many of you may be thinking and feeling: yeah, he sure does know something about making it all complicated. Just imagine, friends, if you were in my head each week! Lost in a maze! Definition of hell!

It gets complicated when we go from the ideal to living what's real. What love means in relation to others. Friends, we have differences about issues; difficult personality traits, all of us. And real trouble arises when those differences define us too much. We delimit life with others, like walls and courtyards in the Temple. Discord. Dispute. Division. Truth is, we all make choices. We can't help it. And we must. We distinguish one possibility, one right from another, one way or another. It gets complicated.

And here's another little bit of news. Church is not the center of culture anymore. The edifice of past assumptions, authority in society, basic familiarity with what we do in here is shaking to the foundations. Not reduced to rubble yet, but cracks appear and pieces fall away. In the past ten years, the percentage of people in our nation who identify as Christian dropped ten points. It is not just a generational trend. Still in people Chrissy's age and younger (it's not her fault by the way!) over a third are unaffiliated, almost 40 percent in the youngest below age 30. That's reality.<sup>i</sup>

But friends, I don't believe it's cause for anxiety or hostility. Yes, we face complications in our living faith. We face personal trials, which might make us wonder about God's presence with us, and God's purposes for us. We face relational conflict, which sure makes it hard to be at peace. We face a world which makes us swing from fear to wonder. We face discord and religious decline in society. And through it all, we keep hope in the central and simple good news we share.

God, who is rich in grace and mercy, makes us alive together in Christ, reads the letter to the Ephesians. It's more like a sermon passed around from one congregation to another. Sort of like forwarding email, or reposting on social media,

or video-conferencing for a webinar. The letter tries to clarify central points of faith; to unify earliest Christians in mind, heart, and real life. You see, people preached about separation—us from God and from one another. Christianity itself had grown beyond Jewish roots (“the circumcised”) to include Gentiles (“the uncircumcised”). Harsh fights and hurt feelings arose between the two camps over which religious rules to follow—dividing walls of belief and practice like those Temple courtyards.

Now in Christ Jesus, all who are near and far from us in miles or emotions, everyone is united in Jesus’ way of sacrificial love—that is, “the blood of Christ”. Last night, Chrissy stressed how Jesus sacrifice was more than just death on the cross; it was his entire life. When we follow this Way of Compassion, trust this Truth of unlimited love, and share this Life of service, we find purpose and peace. We’re built together into a holy temple, where God’s Spirit dwells.

You see, friends, the key to reconciling conflicts is first to be one with God, filled with the love of Christ. In conversations with a friend who left our congregation this past year over conflicts about social issues, he said he just wants to come to worship Jesus. You know, he’s right. That’s why we’re here. Trouble is, for Jesus, faithfulness to God wasn’t just me and Jesus, so to speak. There are always wider implications, often challenging norms of religion and culture.

That’s the challenge Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced under Nazi Germany. Hitler came to power, took over the church, and shut down seminaries. Bonhoeffer started one in secret. Everyone lived in a big house. It was the basis for his book *Life Together*. Christianity means community in which we belong to one another in and through Jesus Christ. How good and pleasant it is to share genuine experiences of this unity and peace. But have no illusion of perfect bliss or expectation of “rapturous lofty moods”, he urges. Loving a dream of community more than reality threatens the

very foundations of life in Christ because we come with demands, we set up our laws, and we tend to judge others and even God in a self-centered, self-righteous posture.

The rest of the book offers a guide to simple living faith in this unity. Here are a few main points. Begin life together in a spirit of gratitude. Giving thanks for little things helps us see and give thanks for bigger things, and pass on such grace to others without descending into complaints and accusations. Center life in the Word and the Spirit, modeled on Jesus who constantly faced enemies and even had his closest friends desert him. Trust God's wisdom revealed in community more than individual insights and agendas alone, always directed toward love of neighbor. Look beyond details of our own place, time and life, to envision how in God's Spirit we're part of the one, holy, universal Christian Church, beyond sectarianism. Always be wary that when we exclude others deemed not good enough we may very well be excluding Christ. Yes, our friend is right. Even in more bitter and fearful disputes it's all about being at one with Christ. None of us strangers, aliens, enemies, all people gathered in to God's household.<sup>ii</sup>

Gratitude to God, trust in Christ, openness in the Spirit. How can we keep that simple inspiration amid all the complications of real life?

Elders and pastors from sister Presbyterian churches in the area joined together this week—North, Pine Island, Schoolcraft, Richland, Westminster, us. Several others face pastoral transition in the months ahead, amid dwindling resources. We considered ways to collaborate, like we're sharing with youth ministry. To begin conversation everyone offered strengths and challenges in our congregations. Of course, everyone shared challenges of aging congregations and waning volunteer energy. And time and again we affirmed two strengths urged in Ephesians and

echoed by Bonhoeffer: 1) caring for one another, bonds of relationship in which we're accepted and supported; and 2) a desire to engage and serve our surrounding community.

In a few moments after worship, we'll share our annual meeting. There's an exciting proposal about changing our by-laws to enable skype / tele-conferencing for meetings. You don't want to miss it! I expect Paul might have been pleased with another way to connect. Still it may not be without controversy, as we address it in good Presbyterian fashion, respectfully, honestly, trying to ensure all voices are valued. There is so much more to celebrate about our life together. And there are complications we face in our time—difficult realities always arise. How can we keep it simple, remaining centered in God's love, without being simplistic? I see it among us. People helping one another here in worship with the bulletin or just getting in or out of the sanctuary. Caring for one another in all the difficulties of life—like when we lose a beloved or face our illness, all the Session members last week wanted to know how to support and surround with prayer. And all the myriad ways we radiate that compassion into our community.

Friends, I love our life together as much as I love our sanctuary. My spirit soars when I enter this space. Despite a few leaks now and then, when the rain and wind blow just right or in spring freezes and thaws, it's all in pretty good shape. And our life together is much the same way. A few leaks and cracks and idiosyncrasies, not perfectly unblemished, but beautiful, strong, meaningful, relevant. And here's the great promise of our living faith. That experience of God's grace and peace can be shared anywhere. We don't need a physical structure like ours. We need relationships of love and forgiveness and commitment and service. It is those bonds more than stone blocks that give meaning to our worship and ministry, built together

as a dwelling place for God. And that witness will offer Sacred Grace to others who are longing for God's love in their lives.

We are imperfect. We have scars on the heart and mind as much as our bodies. And in Jesus Christ, there is no wall, no barrier, no condemnation, no exclusion, no ritual expectation that keeps us from God's love. Despite our leaks, cracks, idiosyncrasies keep that merciful foundation strong. Just maybe then we'll be able to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God and with others, as Jesus did. So may we continue to be a sanctuary and a light ... in our city and far beyond ... through Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>

<sup>ii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954). 21, 26-39.