

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
July 3, 2022 – The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's readings from the Bible deal with large issues, major themes related to a life of faith. Justice and mercy. The world as it is and God's promises for a different future. How to act now, in this world as it is now, while we wait for God.

Let's begin with St. Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. We read a portion of this letter last week, and I spoke then about Paul's reminder that, as followers of Christ, we are to live by the commandment to love. Living by the Spirit – the Holy Spirit – means living by this commandment. Living according to "the flesh" means living in ways contrary to love. In today's reading from this letter Paul reiterates this theme. He also speaks about circumcision. The issue of circumcision is no longer relevant to us today, but the basic point Paul is making is that "externals" are not what is important. What is important is what we do, how we live by love, how we "work for the good of all." That issue remains as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

When questioned, Jesus himself summarized his teaching by quoting verses from the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). These are the first principles from which all of Jesus' teaching – and his life and ministry – flow. Jesus also taught that it is out of the heart – our feelings, will, thought, and intentions – that our actions flow. What is in our hearts – love or whatever opposes love – is most important.

Former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, has written about the challenge of following the Two Great Commandments. Behind her words is the wisdom of centuries of theological reflection. I think she captures the essence of our challenge in simple terms.

"In our faith, in our scriptures, there's a recurring motif about the competition between the powers of self-concern and concern for God and others.... Our fundamental problem as human beings is over-concern with self – what the church has for centuries called 'original sin.' We think more about ourselves than about our neighbors, rather than loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. If that balance is distorted, our relationship with God is equally distorted.... An essential part of our spiritual journey as Christians is about improving the balance between self-love and love of others.... It's not easy.... But there is abundant grace in the struggle." (From "Gathering at God's Table: The Meaning of Mission in the Feast of Faith," Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2012, pages 128-131).

Paul gives an interesting warning in this morning's passage from Galatians. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Galatians 6:7). In the world, as we all know, people often do not reap what they sow. Kind people are treated unkindly and unkind people are treated with kindness. Generous people are taken advantage of by less generous people. The compassion of compassionate people is not returned. Hypocrites are not held to account. People cause all manner of trouble and walk away, leaving behind hurts that are difficult or even impossible to heal. We can all think of examples in our own experience as well as in the lives of others.

I'm sure you all know the saying attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." I think Paul is reminding us that you can't fool God any of the time. People deceive themselves when they think that they can fool God the way they can sometimes fool others. We are reminded of this every Sunday in the words of the Collect for Purity, "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." Paul asserts that living according to the Spirit of love will ultimately lead to eternal life – sharing in the life of God – while living selfishly will not lead to eternal life.

In this morning's lesson from the Gospel of Luke, we read that Jesus sent seventy of his disciples out to do his work in the world, with great power, but with a stern warning: "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." Remember that Jesus has now set his face to Jerusalem and to the cross. His mood is serious and determined. His words are anything but soft and comforting. He is entirely realistic about the power of the evil forces he faces and that his followers will face.

The disciples return from their mission, full of joy because of their many successes. They were able to do great deeds of power in Jesus' name, as his ambassadors. "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" They are giddy with the power to win battles against evil forces. Jesus cuts through their joy with another stern warning: "Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Having one's name written in heaven means the same thing that Paul means by eternal life. Jesus is teaching his disciples – including us – that what matters most is sharing in the life of God.

As Christians we believe that the very nature of God is reciprocal love. We express this theologically in the doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three persons, love given and received and returned eternally. In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, we participate in the divine exchange of love, Christ in us and we in Christ. God has created us in God's image; we are made for loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. When we freely give love and freely receive love, we experience now moments of the eternal life that Christ has promised will be ours to enjoy forever, if our hearts are full of love.

In today's reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah the Lord makes promises of comfort and prosperity to Jerusalem and to God's people. We are meant to understand that whatever misfortune and hardship are present now – "all you who mourn over [Jerusalem]" – in the future God will be to God's servants – the people who love God and walk in God's ways – as a loving mother comforting her child.

We need to hear these promises of God. If you have worked and fought in the past for peace, for racial justice and equality, and for women's rights, you may be discouraged by what is happening in the world now. You may be thinking - again? Do we have to work all over again for these same issues? Didn't we get anywhere with all the struggles of the past?

The world as it is is not the same as the future God promises to those who love God. Absolutely not. Jesus knew this and we know it. What do we do while we wait for the coming of God? We can do the soul work of growing in love. Each of us knows the places in our hearts where love has not yet reached. Each of us knows what we do each day that is contrary to loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. Can we ask God's help to change and to grow in love?

In the latest issue of "Seek and Serve," the newsletter of Episcopal Relief and Development, the President of ERD shared a quotation from the Talmud, a rabbinic commentary on the legal portions of the Old Testament. The commentary refers to a famous quotation from the prophet Micah: "[The Lord] has told you, O human, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The rabbis wrote these words of encouragement, so relevant to us today: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

I hope and pray that our gathering for worship on Sunday mornings helps you to continue to live in God's ways – to love and to work for justice and to act with mercy. Remember God's promises. And remember – in the words of the hymn we sang a few minutes ago: "Come, labor on. Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear! No arm so weak but may do service here: by feeblest agents may our God fulfill his righteous will." So may it be, in Jesus' name. Amen.