

Loving Jesus First

a sermon based on

John 14:15-21

and delivered on-

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6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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We've been social distancing for over two months now. When it began, I didn't think it would be for this long – at least not the sheltering in place aspect of it. For me, I have a wife and two dogs to keep me company. Others don't. Maybe that's why as I pondered the Scriptures for today, I was reminded of this story.

A woman had purchased a parrot to keep her company. The next day, however, she returned to the pet store asking for her money back. "This bird doesn't talk." {aside: Really what sort of companion is that? A bird that sits on a roost doing nothing? I digress }

The shop owner asked, "Is there a mirror in his cage. Parrots love mirrors. When they see themselves they just start up a conversation." {aside: Puppies do that too, but it's not the same.} He's the expert. Right? So the woman bought the mirror and went home.

The next day, she was back at the pet store asking for her money back.

"What about a ladder?" the shopkeeper asked. Parrots love walking up and down a ladder. A happy parrot is much more likely to talk." So... you guessed it: she bought a ladder and went home.

Then the next day, here she comes again. "I want my money back. That bird still won't talk."

"What about a swing?" {aside: Yeah, that's the ticket: a swing} "What about a swing?" the shopkeeper suggested. "Does your parrot have a swing? If not that's the problem. He'll relax and talk up a storm." Not quite enthusiastically, the woman bought a swing and went home.

Then it happened. The next day she came back to the store and announced, "The parrot died."

The store owner was shocked. "I'm sorry. Did he ever say anything?"

"As a matter of fact he did."

"Really? What did he say?"

"Well, right before he died, he said, 'Don't they sell any food at that pet store?'"¹

Did you see that coming? The first time I read that story, I didn't. We just presume that the bird had food. Right? Then we presume, like the shopkeeper convinced the woman, that if we just add some nice things, that everything will work out. Right? But the bird still needs food. Not just any food. Polly won't survive merely on crackers.

My dogs, eat their dog food. I think they like it. But... I also know that they like treats. If I were to fill a bowl with bacon strips and peanut butter and another with beer, my dogs would ignore the dog food and water in the dishes right next to them. They'd have food and drink that makes them happy. They'd even survive for a little while, but they wouldn't thrive: not really. They may perk up for a day or two, but eventually that would wear off.

The natural inclination would be to go back to what made you happy. That's what dogs would do. It's what people do too. Not just for ourselves but for others. We know that our children can't thrive on a diet of chips and treats. They need vegetables and healthy proteins. But it makes them so happy. Right? We know that even though they may enjoy video games, that to grow into prosperous adults they need an education and the dignity and ethic that comes from chores and responsibility. Yet, too often in our culture that gets ignored.

When that happens it's not out of malevolence, but rather misdirection. We even do it in the church. We collect for the food pantry, maybe a church even has a food pantry; or a church sends people on a mission trip to do some good things for people in need. This is good. But is it enough?

I was in a meeting with other clergy and church leaders several months ago in which the discussion turned to how we as a Church (big "C") – not just a local congregation can be in ministry. Many (if not most) shared what their congregations were doing for people. It was all

¹ Edward K Rowell and Bonnie L Steffen, *Humor for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal and Christian Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998) 66.

good things. But I sensed that something was missing. I admit it bugs me that as a United Methodist we don't label (or for contemporary language, "Brand") our institutions. When Marcy-Newberry Center in Chicago closed a few years ago, people grieved the loss of a vital agency serving children. How many of them knew that it was a United Methodist agency supported by gifts from congregations like ours? How many people even know that Rosecrance, here in our area is a United Methodist institution supported in part by giving from congregations like ours? There are so many other examples that I could list. I ask that not so that we can get credit. That's not the point. I ask, because I wonder how many people receiving services realize that the care for children, the care for those afflicted with addiction and their families, the care for the poor and hungry, the care for lonely and elderly isn't just social work for us, it's ministry that we do to share the love of Jesus.

So often we get consumed with providing ladders and mirrors and swings, that we forget what others need. In fact, sometimes we get so consumed with enjoying our own ladders and mirrors and swings, that we die.

In that passage from John today, Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you." (Jn 14:18) Back in the 5th century (almost 1500 years ago) Cyril of Alexandria reflected on this passage and said, "It is impossible for one's soul to accomplish anything good, or to have power over its own passions or to escape the great subtlety of the devil's snare if the soul is not fortified by the grace of the Holy Spirit and has Christ himself within it."²

So much of our yearning and the yearning of the world seeking meaning and just fulfillment, is really rooted in the need to love God. In Matthew 22, when asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded with the Shema (the centerpiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer) "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment." (vv. 27-28) THEN he goes on to say, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (v 29)

The second is like it because it is "a" way that we show God our love. But there's more to it than that. The most important reason to love God isn't just to get to heaven or keep out of hell depending on your perspective. The most important reason to love God, is because until we do, we can't even really love ourselves, because we don't appreciate who we really are. We were made in the image of God.

Last week, we heard the beginning of this passage from John, when Jesus says to his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." (Jn 14:2) When we hear that, most of us think of a building; but that's not what it really means. My Father's house isn't about a thing or a physical place, it refers to a place of belonging. The Father's house isn't heaven or paradise, it's a recognition that we – as human beings – have this special connection to God.

The salvation that Jesus offers us through his death on the cross and resurrection means more than being "saved from" death or hell. The word in Greek soterion like our word salve means healing and restoration.

The Pharisees got distracted by laws – trying to do good to please God. We as Christians sometimes do the same when we get distracted – in the Methodist vernacular of our General Rules – Doing no harm and Doing Good, to the exclusion of the third rule "To attend upon the ordinances of God" what Bishop Rueben Job called "staying in love with God." The first two are important, but ultimately insufficient.

The ordinances that help us to love God are these: the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded; the Supper of the Lord; family AND private prayer;

² Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 11-21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4b (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2007) 142.

searching the Scriptures; and fasting and abstinence.³ These are the things that we sometimes neglect. Sometimes because we're trying so hard to be good. It feels good, so we keep trying but... maybe still looking.

As much as I'm ready to stop sheltering in place, I see that this offers us a new time for renewal and getting the fortification – the food that we need. Even at this moment, we're engaged in the public worship of God and the ministry of the word; but we also have the opportunity to renew our family and private prayer, time to reorder our lives to search the Scriptures. Without business lunches maybe a time to fast. Yes, we'll wait until we're together for the Supper of the Lord, but it's only a wait.

I wish I could have found the exact citation, but I'm reminded that John Wesley was once asked how he found time to pray with so much to do. His response was telling, "I have so much to do that I don't have time NOT to pray."

Ladders, mirrors, and swings are good. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is good. Really loving ourselves, means loving Jesus first, because in him we get to see how wonderfully God loves us, and in him we get to see that in others and maybe help them to see it for themselves, so that they will live to enjoy their ladders, and mirror, and swings.

AMEN.

³ United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016) 80.