

Message: Turn to God

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, “Don’t do it!”

He said, “Nobody loves me.”

I said, “God loves you. Do you believe in God?”

He said, “Yes.” I said, “Are you a Christian or a Jew?” He said, “A Christian.” I said, “Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?” He said, “Protestant.” I said, “Me, too! What denomination?” He said, “Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” He said, “Northern Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist.” I said, “Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” I said, “Me, too!”

I said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.”¹ I said, “Die, heretic!” And I pushed him over.¹

If you’re Baptist, please forgive my attempt at levity. I don’t mean to give offense. But, given the events of this week and the season we’re beginning, it seemed like a little humor would help. Otherwise, we might find ourselves in tears. Sadly, there is truth behind this joke. People discriminate unfairly.

It feels like the world is spinning – literally and figuratively, as I stand before you today. This has been a challenging week for our denomination. It has been a challenging week for the delegates and representatives who attended the General Conference in St. Louis. It has been a challenging week for the LGBTQIA+ community. It has been a challenging week for everyone, no matter whether you’re a traditionalist, centrist or progressive. There are many who are hurting today.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>

On behalf of faithful brothers and sisters across the world, please know this: you ARE loved. You ARE welcome. God's grace is for ALL people. For those who were hurt by the actions that transpired this week and the harsh words spoken, I'm sorry. Please forgive us. I urge you - speak up! Don't be silent. Ask hard questions. Hold us accountable. Stay with us, for you make us better. The actions and words spoken do not represent all of the church, no matter what side you may support. God's love and grace flow as God wills, not as humanity says it will.

I spent some time wrestling with what to say today. God provided. God's grace gives us Scripture for reflection and study. Then we consider our traditions, experience and use our reason. I'm continually amazed at how God's grace moves in such a simple, yet powerful way, every week. The Revised Common Lectionary is put together 4-5 years in advance of the date it's applied. And we use an annual worship plan here at Corona UMC. So the Holy Spirit is at work. I know that every time I hear someone say, "Today's reading or sermon was for me." Today, that's true for all of us.

We read about a mountain top experience that Peter, James and John had with Jesus (Luke 9:28-36). Jesus was transformed before them and God spoke saying, "*This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!*" (v35). The glory of God was revealed in Jesus! Amen. We're reminded that we can trust God and put our faith in Jesus, for he is not of this world. Jesus is our Savior, the one who came to save us.

Now normally, we'd stop there. We'd spend time reflecting on the nature of God, the response of the disciples and what was revealed. However, this year an additional set of verses was included.

I invite you to read verse 37-43 with me.

"The next day, when Jesus, Peter, John, and James had come down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. A man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn't.'

Jesus answered, ‘*You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.*’ While he was coming, the demon threw him down and shook him violently. Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father. Everyone was overwhelmed by God’s greatness.” (CEB)

This is a hard passage to read and understand. Jesus and his inner circle have literally just come down from the ultimate mountain top experience to ... what? Failure!

A large crowd meets them at the foot of the mountain. The rest of the disciples are present. They’ve been trying to do the work Jesus has taught them to do, but they aren’t doing very well. In fact, the crowd now has doubts whether Jesus can help them or not!

A man shouts out, asking Jesus to help his young son. The passage tells us the boy is being harmed by a demon that possesses him. Whether it’s an actual spiritual possession or epilepsy or a combination of both, we don’t know. What we do know is that the disciples failed to help, even though Jesus had given them the power to do so. And we don’t see Peter, James and John – fresh from seeing Jesus’ glory, jumping in to do anything.

You don’t have to look very far to see their failure. Luke 9:1 says, “*Jesus called the Twelve together and he gave them power and authority over all demons and to heal sicknesses.*” Jesus sent them our, two by two, to do the mission on their own. And in verse 10, “*When the apostles returned, they described for Jesus what they had done.*” To add insult to injury, eight days earlier Jesus asked the disciples “*Who do you say I am?*” Peter replied, “*The Christ sent from God*” (v20).

What happened? I believe there are several layers. For one thing, the people were looking for Jesus to do everything. That’s why he calls them a faithless generation. Waiting for God to show up and lift us out of our circumstance isn’t the same thing as having the faith to turn to God and believe. We can’t say “save me Lord from my wrongdoing, addictions or bad behavior” without actually wanting to change, to be free of what limits and bind us.

Another thing is the failure of the disciples. Jesus gave them the power and authority to act. This isn't just true for leaders, but for all who follow Jesus. There are ramifications when we fail to do what Jesus calls and equips us to do. We do harm to others by our actions and our silence. We put limits on good things and who we deem worthy. We lose our faith: we don't stay in love with God. We don't believe there's a way to heal.

Matthew 17 gives a little more perspective. "The disciples came to Jesus in private and said, 'Why couldn't we throw the demon out?' 'Because you have little faith,' he said. *'I assure you that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, "Go from here to there," and it will go. There will be nothing that you can't do'*" (vv19-20).

This week, we experienced what the disciples experienced and the world experienced what the crowd experienced. We failed. It doesn't matter what side of the issues we were on. We harmed one another. We harmed the LGBTQIA community. We harmed our children. We diminished our ability to witness to God's love and to do good work in the world. We lost credibility as a church.

We need to turn back to God. That's where our hope lies. Our faith needs to grow. We need to learn how to forgive one another so we can find the way God is leading us. We need to embrace God's uncommon grace, but it will come at a cost. It's no coincidence that this happened right before we begin the season of Lent, a season of prayer, reflection and change.

Why wear ashes on Wednesday? Wear them as a sign of your willingness to change by God's grace. Wear them as a sign of your solidarity with those who have been and are being ostracized and rejected by the very body whose purpose is to love and care for them. Wear them as a sign of your doubt that humans can solve problems alone: we need a loving, forgiving Jesus to save and guide us. Wear them as a sign of your faith in Jesus, even if your faith in the church is wavering. I'll be wearing ashes on Wednesday as a sign of my love for Jesus. I invite you to join me.

Come, Lord Jesus, and transform our heart, mind and will so that we may become more like you!

Let us pray ...

God of mercy and grace. We come to you with hearts and minds that are full of the news of this week. In our hearts, we know that the harsh words and unkind actions taken are merely the tip of the iceberg. Lead us now, Lord, as we ask difficult questions. Help us to listen to one another. Give us the courage to share our stories. Show us the way of true love and grace. In the name of the one who paid the ultimate price for forgiveness, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

“A Home for All God’s People” – I invite us into a season of prayer. I encourage us to listen to each other’s stories. You can’t say “us” or “them” once you know the person you are talking to. Only by listening and understanding one another, and looking for how God is present, can we hope to follow God’s will.

Meditation & Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray:

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God.

Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God.

Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God.

Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ.

Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ.

Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ.

Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you.

Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you.

Holy Spirit, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy.

Holy One, come to us. May it be so, O Trinity of Love.

Alleluia! Amen.

You are invited to lift up prayers as the people of God

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43) (CEB)

About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus' departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem. Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep, but they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him.

As the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it's good that we're here. We should construct three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - but he didn't know what he was saying. Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them. As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe.

Then a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone. They were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen.

The next day, when Jesus, Peter, John, and James had come down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. A man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn't."

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