

Sermon for Sunday, August 4, 2019

Mind the Gap

This past week the children of Ladue Chapel and some of their friends took part in our annual week of VBS. We had over 50 children participate in the program as well as 30 youth helpers and over 20 adult leaders. Each morning we started the day in Fellowship Hall remembering that the bible calls us to Love God and Love our neighbor—but that begs the question “Who is my Neighbor?” Each day we looked at a different bible story that helped us answer that question and learn what it means to be a neighbor.

While some of you were involved in the week—and know what we went over—we’re going to spend a few minutes recapping what we learned at VBS.

On Monday we engaged the story of the Good Samaritan—how the Samaritan wasn’t expected to stop for the injured person on the side of the road but chose to show compassion even to someone who was thought to be his enemy. Through his actions we learned that a neighbor is anyone we meet who is in need.

Tuesday was a story from the Old Testament—that involved Isaac—it’s a story about how, after his father Abraham had died—Isaac inherited the wells which Abraham had dug—these wells were important because the water they produced allowed Isaac to grow crops and the crops allowed him to have sheep—all of those resources and possessions equaled great wealth. That wealth caused Isaac’s neighbors to become jealous—so jealous that they filled in the wells. King Abimelech even paid Isaac a visit and told that he had become too powerful and needed to leave. So Isaac left, and after some time came back and began to re-dig the wells. The first well produced water but a sheep herder came and told Isaac that the water no longer belonged to him or his family—so Isaac moved on. He re-dug the second well, only to have the same thing happen again—he moved on and re-dug the third well... This time, no one else laid claim to the water—so Isaac built an altar giving thanks to God. King Abimelech even returned to Isaac with a promise which came down to—I won’t hurt you if you won’t hurt me. Through this—off beat story, we learned through Isaac that neighbors do everything we can to live peacefully with each other.

Wednesday was the story of the Great banquet—a story which Jesus told about someone who decided to throw a big party—they sent out invitations and all of their friends were excited and planned to come—but when the waiters went out on the day of the event, everybody who had been invited suddenly had other plans—the waiters went back and broke the news to the host who decided to change the plan! He sent the waiters back out to find and invite anybody who needed a good meal—and when that had been done, there was still room—the host sent the waiters out AGAIN—looking for even more people—a reminder that all of our neighbors are invited!

And on Thursday—we read a story about the early church—how after Jesus had died and had been raised by God, Jesus sent the disciples out to share the stories about what they had seen Jesus do—and as they told stories about Jesus healing the sick and feeding the hungry—more and more people started worshiping with the disciples—and as they shared meals together they found out that some of their new friends needed clothes, and others needed a safe place to live, and others needed food—so they shared everything they had with each other so that no one was in need—a reminder that we share what we have with our neighbors.

As I looked at the text for today I couldn’t help but feel like this story could have easily been added in to the week—because through it we’re reminded that in God’s kingdom we are called to be stewards of what God gives us—

So while Monday was “love God and love neighbor” and Tuesday was “Live peacefully” Wednesday was “Everyone is invited” and Thursday was “Share with others”, today is “reconciling with neighbors”

We pick up our story as a man approaches Jesus with a request: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” At first glance this request appears to be a cry for justice—there has been a death in the family and now one brother—assumed to be the older brother—is withholding the younger brother’s share of the inheritance. Jesus responds saying; “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”...

This is not the response I would expect from Jesus...the younger brother has come with what sounds like a legitimate cry for justice—he has been denied his rightful portion of the inheritance—and yet Jesus responds with a non-response...

It’s like I can hear the wheels in the younger brother’s head turning—“Who set you to be a judge or arbitrator over us? Uuummmmm I’m pretty sure GOD!”

But then Jesus launches into a parable which looks to be unrelated but at it’s core helps us understand what true wealth looks like in God’s kingdom.

Jesus begins the parable: the land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

The main character of the parable is faced with a problem, so he begins to think through what he should do next. While this may sound typical of problem solving—we have to remember Jesus context and the Middle Eastern culture where this story is set.

In his book, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey comments on the isolation of the rich man saying:

“In the middle east, village people make decisions about important topics after long discussions with their friends. Families, communities and villages are tightly knit together. Everybody’s business is everybody else’s business. Even trivial decisions are made after hours of discussion with family and friends. But this man appears to have no friends. He lives in isolation from the human family around him, and with an important decision to make the only person with whom he can have a dialogue is himself.” P.303

The fact that he is having to make decisions is not the problem it’s that he is making them all by himself without anyone else to help guide or ask questions about what he is doing. He is alone with only his thoughts and desires— all he knows is what he wants, not what others may need.

As he continues to come up with a solution he says ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Ok—we need to pause—because at this point, it may be easy to think that this passage is claiming that storing or saving is somehow a bad or even evil thing. But that’s far from the point of this text.

Instead as we look closer we see just how alone he is: I will do this, I will pull down, I will store, I will say to my soul.

The fact that he has had a bumper crop isn’t the problem, the fact that he is saving for the future isn’t even the problem—the problem is revealed in the next verse:

“God said to him, “You Fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

At the heart of the parable is a reminder; the resources and things that we have don’t actually belong to us, we’re only stewards of what we’ve been given.

In fact if we go back to the beginning of the parable, Jesus starts by saying “The land of a rich man produced abundantly...”

The land produced...the overabundance isn't due to this man's work or effort—he was *given* a bumper crop...He was also given the choice of what to do with it...

I wonder what the man who originally asked Jesus to talk to his brother about the inheritance heard, when Jesus told this parable....

A man who came hoping Jesus would side with him and get him the money he so rightly deserved....

But what if Jesus had something else in mind.

The issue of the inheritance had obviously caused a rift between the brothers—a rift that went so deep the younger brother was desperate for someone to take his side and force his brother's hand.

But Jesus wouldn't have it—instead through the parable Jesus offered a different interpretation of how we are to understand the wealth and resource we have; the parable ends with a warning by Jesus; “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

So what does it mean to be rich toward God? That question isn't directly answered by the text but I can't help but think about the two brothers—brothers who were torn apart because of greed.

What if being rich toward God is being in relationship with others? Not only being in relationship with them, but learning the needs of others and being willing to share the resources we have been given. This can only come out of an understanding that while we may have worked for what we have, nothing fully belongs to us—it has all been given by and belongs to God.

Because the truth is, when we die, our bank accounts stay behind along with the house and car and everything else we've accumulated—but what continues on with us are the relationships we've made, the kindness we've shared and the love we've shown to others.

It's been a while since I've been to London but I can still hear the voice on the subway saying “Mind the Gap”. Reading this story and thinking of the rich fool, all he could see was what was best for him and his future, not even aware of the needs of those around him and the gap that lay between his world and theirs.

One of our Presbyterian forebears Karl Barth was famous for saying: “take your bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your bible.

This morning as I pulled up this sermon I also opened the news. I had gone to bed knowing of the shooting in El Paso but this morning news broke of yet another shooting in Ohio. The issue of gun violence, mass shootings and the call for gun control is one that ignites deep passions and it can be difficult to engage in conversations—let alone make decisions on what to do next. It's easy for us to get entrenched on one side or the other and yet here we are yet again—grieving the deaths of at least 30 people and even more injured—our hearts are broken and we're filled with a mix of emotions.

While our text for today doesn't speak of a solution to gun violence, it does call us to mind the gap which seems to be ever widening between the neighbors God calls us to love.

As we prepare to join around the communion table—we are reminded that God has called us to not only be in relationship with God, but also with each other—this table is the ultimate symbol that all are welcome in God's kingdom and part of what it means for us to be disciples of Christ is to mind the gap—to be aware, to look out, and know the needs of the world around us and to respond with compassion, because when we do we are being good stewards of what God has given us and slowly we build bridges between neighbors. We reconcile.

Mind the gap—may we be aware of the needs around us and respond with compassion because when we do we are reconciling with our neighbors and that is who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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