

“Out of Focus”

Sermon – October 1, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

“Your life is controlled by what you focus on,” says motivational speaker Tony Robbins. Our scripture passages today speak to that.

In the gospel lesson from Matthew 21 the question is what is the focus of Jesus and what is the focus of the religious leaders.

The beginning of chapter 21 is Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, that is Palm Sunday. And upon his arrival he goes to the temple, drives out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and overturns the tables of the money changers.

The next day he curses the fig tree and then enters the temple again where today’s story picks up with his first of many exchanges with the religious leaders, which we will hear some in the following weeks.

Obviously, the priests and elders of the people are upset that this rabbi from Galilee basically called them out saying the system was rigged—poor people being forced to pay for sacrifices that enriched the religious leaders, missing the whole point of the temple. So, they try to call Jesus out and ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things?”

It puts Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he says “from God” they could come up with a charge of blasphemy. If he says “from a rabbi I know”, then they can dismiss him as likely his followers will as well.

So, Jesus turns the tables and asks them essentially, “By what authority was the baptism of John?” And here is where the religious leaders show their focus—themselves. Their internal debate isn’t even whether John’s baptism was divine or human; it is which one serves their interests.

And it turns out picking either gets them in trouble because if it were divine, why didn’t they change their ways or if it were not, they risk an

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uprising from the people. This should tell them that something was wrong with the status quo.

Jesus then has a short parable about two sons. The first son initially does not obey his father’s will, but then changes his mind. The second says he will, but then does not. The religious leaders, as would all of us, agree the first one did his father’s will—it’s not what you say you’ll do, but what you actually do.

Jesus then tells the religious leaders they are essentially like the second son and the sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) are like the first son. John came and the religious leaders did not believe, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when the religious leaders saw this repentance of sinners, Jesus said, “you did not change your minds and believe him.”

But what exactly did those unrighteous “believe”? They believed John that the kingdom of God was coming and that everyone needed to repent personally and corporately and so they changed their minds and with baptism reoriented their lives with their focus on God.

The Greek word here for “change your mind” is nowhere else in the New Testament, but it is a synonym for the Greek word meaning to “repent.” And this is what the religious leaders refused to do because it would have been admitting that the system needed to change.

Recall that 90% of the people in Jesus’ day were poor, but the religious leaders focus was on themselves and doubled down on the system that gave them power, money, and prestige under the guise of being religious while the folks struggling to get by they castigated as sinners.

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We see an analogous situation today where the top 1% have over 1/3 of our country’s wealth while the bottom half own just 1% of all the wealth.

And yet, the populist sentiment is to blame the government and the poor and leave the rich alone. What is worse is much of this is supported under the guise of Christian righteousness—or rather unrighteousness. No appears to be changing their mind to be of one mind.

The epistle lesson today also discusses being of one mind.

You might find today’s passage from Philippians 2:1-13 to be familiar. That is because verses 5-11 were the lection for Palm Sunday this year as they will be next year as well. And that’s because those verses are known as the “Christ hymn.” They are called that because they may have been an early hymn of the church and they describe the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, and, in so doing, develop a vision for what it means to be fully human before God.

Today’s extended passage addresses how to handle dissension that Paul has heard about in Philippi. Despite being in prison, Paul focuses not on his condition but a church, which he founded.

The Greek verb that shapes this whole reading is *phroneō*, which is to have a depth of understanding and practical wisdom, to know how to act rightly, especially in confusing or complex circumstances.

Paul uses this verb twice in verse 2, and then it becomes the governing verb for the Christ Hymn of verses 5-11. English does not have a verb like this, so it is often translated as “having a certain mind” toward things.

Here, where Paul is stressing the need for unity, it shows up as “be of the same mind,” “be of one mind,” “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. But turning the verb *phroneō* into the noun “mind” loses

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the kind of fully embodied wisdom gained over time and experience that is really at stake here.

Paul’s rhetorical purpose is primarily to give a pattern of thinking and living—one grounded in the way of Jesus, which includes unity and humility.

But unity does not mean uniformity, as so many would have today and impose on others against their will. It is making a space for others, as opening oneself for otherness. It is about being hospitable. It’s about focusing on others. For true humility is measured, not by low self-evaluation, but by demonstrable concern for others as Paul writes in verse 4.

The Christ Hymn that follows verse 4 has two parts: first, Christ’s choice to descend from his position of power and status “in the form of God,” taking on the “form of a slave,” completely obedient to God’s mission; and secondly his subsequent exaltation by God to the highest place.

The first half depends upon Christ’s moral choice; the second half is purely the power of God at work in raising and exalting the faithful Christ.

This clarity about the distinction between what human beings can control and what is only the work of God is then mirrored in verses 12 and 13: “work out your own salvation ... for it is God who is at work among you.”

But Paul’s focus here has nothing to do with salvation in the sense of how one is saved. Instead, Paul is concerned here with how “saved” (believing) people live out their salvation here and now in this world. And these are matters of obedience, humility, and public witness.

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The religious leaders with Jesus and the dissenters among the Philippians were out of focus. In their case, and ours, the focus should be on God. They needed to change their minds to be of the same mind. We today must do the same, to be in communion with one another through Christ. Attunement to God’s presence is what fuels Christian moral discernment, transforming it from an effort to a joy.

And that is what people should see: the love and joy we have for each other seeking unity of inclusion and celebrating diversity with a humility focused on others through the eye—and heart—of Christ.

As theologian and Nazi resistor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Your life as a Christian should make non-believers question their disbelief in God.”

So let’s show them.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.