

“Winning Hearts and Minds”

Sermon – January 28, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Persuade or manipulate, discuss or debate, excite or incense. You might call these two sides of the same coins but that only contributes to binary notion of things being black or white, right or wrong, win or lose.

In reality, things tend to be along a continuum, like shades of gray or even multidimensional like colors.

Today’s political and cultural discourse has become pretty binary—us vs. them—when people’s beliefs among the population is much more diverse and nuanced. It’s a challenge when someone says, “Pick a side.”

Today’s lectionary passages speak to that in different ways.

From Deuteronomy we hear of God selecting a prophet to take over after Moses is gone and that prophet will speak God’s word. The question that of course comes up is how we discern true prophets from false ones?

And in the passage from 1 Corinthians Christians were eating meat from pagan sacrifices. Is that all right or does it make it look like you are worshiping both Yahweh and pagan gods? I mean, if you brought in a pie for us to eat and said, “Oh, this was left over at the Satan worshippers pie sale and they gave it to me for free” how would we feel?

And in the gospel passage from Mark, what does it mean to cast out unclean spirits, since we don’t see a lot of that these days? What message are we to take away from that?

All of these can be boiled down to this question: where is your focus? The more it is focused on God, the more you’re on the right track. And what does it mean to be focused on God? Well, where is God’s focus? On his people, on humanity, on humans being humane. God’s focus is his *love* for us. He sent his son—not for God’s sake, but for ours.

Thus, true prophet is not self-aggrandizing. The prophet does not seek status, riches, or glory. The prophet speaks for what is best for the people.

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Of the Ten Commandments the third one is “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

That doesn’t mean saying “Oh my God” so much; it is using and doing things in the name of God to manipulate people and advance your own personal agenda, something all too prevalent today. A true prophet looks to free people, not enslave them.

Now being human, a prophet is not perfect. But they hold themselves accountable, acknowledging when they have erred, repenting and seeking forgiveness, and changing their ways.

Today we don’t really worry about eating the food of idols and confusing people new to the faith, but what about other issues, such as the pandemic? We as a church and in the world had to wrestle with a host of questions. Was it safe to meet in person? Should we have masks? Should we take the vaccine? Fortunately, this congregation chose to err on the safety of others.

Followers of Christ look to see if their actions hurtful or helpful to others. They do not look inward, insisting on their individual “rights”; they look to see what is best for the community, to the wellbeing of others.

Paul tells us that the key to community-building is love—to love those who do not agree with us, those whom we cannot understand easily. Harmony is not the state of agreeing with each other on certain knowledge, but of loving each other amid disagreement.

For Paul, love in the community does not necessarily mean that you have to like the other people in the community, or that you have to agree with what they decide or how they understand the world. Rather you have to modify

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your own behavior in order to protect them and to make sure that they are not offended by your own behavior.

And in today’s gospel passage we see that Jesus freed the man with the unclean spirit, liberated him to be a whole man again. And while we may not experience unclean spirits as described by Mark, we see people bound up with fear, anger, hatred, sometimes because of false prophets.

We may not be able to free them by command as Jesus did, but we can be empathetic and reach out in love. As Paul says in the beginning of today’s passage [1 Corinthians 8:1b] “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Last week we heard guest preacher Larry Beasley extol you for being a vibrant, active, community of Christ followers, living out the call of being a Matthew 25 church.

And you have heard from our committees and teams and read in the annual report the good works you have done living out as Paul writes in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

I say this not to puff you up but to encourage you to gird up your loins and continue the good fight in winning the hearts and minds of those in need through love.

As 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” So fear not, my friends—God is with you.

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