

“Priorities”

Sermon – May 12, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

<Act distracted, ignoring the congregation>

Let's see finish the service, turn off the sound system, bring in the signs, post the video, shut down projector, put away laptop, lock doors, turn off lights, oh, and visit with people at hospitality time, I guess.

Go home, do laundry, do reports for session meeting, send sermon to Liz to post, work on newsletter cover, work on estate planning documents, continue practicing German for trip at the end of August.

Monday go to my day job in Rome, do Toastmasters meeting at noon, leave early for meeting with financial planner, moderate session meeting in the evening, study to play Asahel Norton on Saturday.

Then on Tuesday...

Oh, sorry—I got distracted. I guess I should do the sermon first.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Action expresses priorities.”

In other words, it doesn't really matter what you say your priorities are; what you actually do by definition are your priorities.

For example, you heard my laundry list of activities—that, ironically, included laundry—of doing many “things”; not so much about people or about God.

In truth, my family got together yesterday to celebrate our son Jesse's birthday, which was on Friday, and I will try to see my granddaughter's soccer game today.

And I have talked to family of Rob Willson about his death 10 days ago and my own mother yesterday, including wishing her happy Mother's Day.

Oh, and my wife, uh, Helen. I should pencil her in.

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But where is God in all that? Yes, I am conducting today’s worship service and in community with you and we certainly desire and welcome God’s presence here. But being a Christian is more than worshipping just an hour, *<look at watch>* maybe an hour and ten minutes, on a Sunday morning.

In physics we call that a necessary but not sufficient condition.

You could say being a Christian is a full-time activity, but that is also not sufficient.

Being a Christian is being Christ-centered and letting the Holy Spirit work through you as part of your being, not just actions you do.

By doing so you can let God’s love for you be shared organically with others.

But being God-centered is not just a conscious act that we do ourselves; it requires God’s assistance. And for that we need prayer. Prayer not just for us but also for others.

Jesus knew that and modeled it for his disciples and for us.

Today’s gospel lesson is a prayer—actually part of a prayer—that we don’t hear often. Ascension Day is always 40 days after Easter and is on a Thursday. I typically use that lectionary for the following Sunday, even though it is always the same. But the seventh Sunday in Easter has its own lectionary like any other Sunday.

So this year I did a mash-up of Ascension for the first reading from Acts and this Sunday’s lectionary for the second lesson from Acts and for the gospel lesson.

We all know Jesus’ prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his betrayal by Judas and arrest asking God if he can be spared but if not then God’s will.

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Today’s passage from John 17:6–19 shows the power and necessity of intercessory prayer. Here Jesus is not praying for himself or even the world, but for his disciples, his friends.

Here in John 17 prays for them because he loves them and knows what they do not—that after he is gone they will undergo much suffering in proclaiming his word and performing deeds in his name.

He prays that God the Father will protect them from “the world.” In John’s works “the world” is not an evil place on the physical plane to escape from to heaven on a pure spiritual plane. Remember, John 3:16 starts, “For God so loved the world...”

Here “the world” means whatever principalities and powers whether civil, religious, or socio-cultural, that promote and propagate division, hatred, discord, or other attitudes and practices that are obstructions to Jesus’ ministerial vision. When Jesus says in today’s verse 16, “They do not belong to the world” he means his disciples loyalties are not to these things but to God.

Jesus prays that God protect them as he has until now. Now you are forgiven if you say, “How did God protect them? All except the Apostle John were martyred.” That’s because the protection was not from the trials and tribulations they are to face; it was for his disciples to keep the faith, proclaim the word, and perform good deeds in Jesus’ name despite the suffering they will endure.

They are to be protected so that they may love as they have been commanded to love in a way that not only draws them into union with the divine love but also shows that love to the world into which they are being sent as Jesus has been sent.

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The protection is also for unity as Jesus prays in verse 11, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Again, you may say, “Well, not only are we not one today but we have factions diametrically opposed to each other.” And for that I point back to last week’s lesson when Jesus said, “abide in my love” and “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Without love and love for one another we cannot be one. That is on us, not God.

In verse 17 Jesus then prays, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Sanctification means being made pure and holy but **not** by being set apart. It is not a way of being taken out of the world but being sent into it. It is intended as the way for disciples to be sent forth to share the Truth and the Word. And, as verse 13 says, “that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Because as I mentioned last week and assuredly will again is the Gospel of John’s understanding of “eternal life.” In John’s Gospel, eternal life is not about immortality or the afterlife. Rather, it is how John speaks about the kingdom of God, a God-infused reality taking shape in the present, a present that we are to actively participate in.

And that is the purpose of Jesus’ ascension. The ascension does not celebrate Jesus’ departure from a cruel, wicked world into a heavenly paradise where one day his beleaguered followers will join him. Rather, it signals the expansive horizon of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ—as far and wide as all creation.

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One man could not spread the message throughout the world. Jesus needed his disciples then and throughout the centuries to even now with us to spread the word.

As Christians, our priorities need to be God-centered. We still need take care of our daily chores and take rest to recharge our batteries but as part of letting the Spirit work through us as the body of Christ.

For working together as one in the spirit and with love for one another is the way to change the world’s priorities from self-centered to love-centered.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.