

Actual Message:

Well, friends! Let's begin with Prayer this morning!

Prayer:***Series Introduction:***

Well, People of God. It feels like it's been forever since I've seen you, much less spoken to us.

Today we're beginning a new series that will carry us to the end of November, the beginning of the Advent season.

What we're going to do is talk about a number of different topics, ideas, biblical passages, scenes in the life of the early church and situations we face now that I hope will help us figure out how to make sense out of all the things that we're hearing every day.

Because we hear all sorts of things.

Introduction: Exposure to Wonder & to Evil

In fact, we hear more about more than humanity ever has before. We're more aware of wonderful things, of triumphs of the human spirit, of heroics, of natural wonders, of scientific breakthroughs like miracles, than we've ever been. There's more to be in awe of, because we have more capacity to be aware of it, than ever before.

And the opposite is true. We're more aware of evil than we've ever been. Our ability to pretend that the world is not complex and full of evil is thinner than ever. I hesitate to list even the smallest bit of the evil we know, for two reasons: The first, because when do you stop listing? It just goes on and on. The second, because I'd list evil that we ourselves have benefited from, and alienate us all from the get go. I want to wait for a different Sunday for that. The truth is that evil is rampant--we kill, we enslave, we torture, we dehumanize, we possess, and we steal. And we're deeply addicted to watching, seeing, hearing about it without doing much to end it. It's our entertainment, our coliseum.

Introduction: Ways Conversations Go:

And here's where how we talk about this can fork. We can say, with a sigh, that the world has always been this way, but we just weren't aware. That's true. We'd go on to talk about how we can make individual ethical choices as best as we're able, how we can build sanctuaries for ourselves, and ignore engaging anything beyond us.

We can say, with rage, that we live in a time of late-stage Capitalism, where the powers of both expanding corporations and retracting state rampantly rule over every moment of our lives that can be accounted, and we're all enslaved in some system we can't escape.

That's true. We'd go on to talk about how we have to work against sin that's embedded in our social structures and build outposts where we can conspire together to do it.

We can say, with nostalgic longing or disruptive opportunism that society as we've known it is gone, and whatever's coming won't be recognizable. That's true. In the transition we're in, we'd retreat, recreating pockets of familiar subcultures, or we'd strike out, clicking together with like-minds and building some new community.

Introduction: Fleeing, Fighting, Freezing:

Any of these are possibilities, right? And far more besides. Change demands a response, and whether or not we believe the world has always been changing, or has changed more quickly or less quickly for the particular group of people we identify with, change always, always, always drives a response of some kind. Not just fright or flight, not just attack or retreat, but freezing, too: A decision to do nothing, and see if your stillness keeps you safe.

All around us there is fighting, there is flying--fleeing--and there is freezing in response to the way the world is right now. We react to what we see, and a thousand things determine our responses--our privilege, our wealth, our education, our race, our language, our generational assumptions, our economic opportunities.

And while almost any response to the world around us is valid, not every response is in line with the way of Jesus, and people of goodwill and deep intimacy disagree about what we ought to do, given the way the world is.

In fact, when Paul says what he says in today's passage, that we're meant to put off our "old self" and instead "be made new in the attitude of our minds, and put on the new self, created to be like God in true covenant faithfulness and holiness," he's saying, explicitly, that because we are Christians we ought to react differently than those who are not. To ape the world is to live a life that's heard-hearted, ignorant, with a shaky sense of understanding what's going on around us. Instead, we follow God's example, set in Jesus.

Introduction: Hopes:

What I hope, over the next couple of months, is that I can give us things to think about that will help shape our response to the news, whatever it is. I want us to not feel helpless at what we see, or hear, or read about. I want us to understand that there are many perspectives on what the only natural response can be to whatever news we hear, but not every response is equally good, or equally open for a Christian. We who follow Jesus give up all sorts of luxuries; one of them is our ability to simply fight, or flee, or freeze.

I also hope that we discover, as we talk about these things, individual and collective responses that are good--by which we mean they line up with Jesus, our ethical standard.

Every single one of us, including me, is going to have our opinions, our preferences, and our perspectives challenged here, because none of us are in perfect harmony with Jesus, have had all of these things we hold, much less the behaviors they give rise to, refined against his example. And if you have been perfected, then I apologize--just another sign I haven't yet been, I guess.

Introduction: Busy Lives!

I know, too, that none of us have time to think about the things we see, hear, or read. We've got work, we've got chores, we've got kids and parents and clubs and pets. We've got to live, you know? In the middle of our illnesses, our financial worries, our family strife, and life transitions. We're living, all the time, but the truth is that if we're going to read about things on Facebook and Twitter, hear about things on the News or Online, dive deep in podcasts and books that talk about the world around us, if we're going to do this, we have to do something on account of what we learn. It's just mental meth, sugary stimulation, and an authentic addiction, if all we do is become informed for being informed's sake. The bare minimum we're asked to do is pray, and we aren't even always

sure how to pray for the things we hear about, because we aren't sure how to think about them well. I want to at least position us for that much over the next couple of months.

So I don't want to minimize the effort it takes to handle our very real full-lives, which can emotionally feel all-consuming, but none of us lives in the unhappy vacuum of our own trouble. And we have to think about how to live well in the world as it is. So. That's why we're talking about these things.

This Morning:

I had planned to go on from here and talk about worldviews: What a worldview is, how they function to provide us with a conception of how the world works, one that's informed by the controlling stories we have about the world, stories that are encapsulated in the symbols we live with, are seen in the behaviors we take, and answer the basic questions every group of people have: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? What time is it?

I just don't think this isn't the moment for that. We'll probably come around to it sometime soon.

I want to do two things instead. I want to remind us who we have the least mercy toward. And I want to invite us to challenge our hate. That's all for now, and introduction enough to what we'll be thinking about

over the next few months.

Merciless:

I'll cast our minds to Matthew 9. Jesus is lounging on Matthew's porch. He shouldn't be; as far as most of Jesus' fellow Israelites are concerned, Matthew's an unclean tax-collector, a race-traitor, Iago and Brutus, a someone who works with an enemy army.

John the Baptist's followers surround Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees come up, too. Their expectations about what a godly person, a faithful person, should do are not just going unmet, but being flouted, you know. Actively rejected. Jesus reminds them of God's nature: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He quotes. God "desires mercy, not sacrifice." He tells them they should be joining the party, and celebrating that people who are sick and need healing are being made better. He uses some common-sense questions to point out that their responses are all wrong.

And I've often thought about this scene on Matthew's patio. How five feet off the patio, in the evening dark, all the people in this scene would have looked exactly the same to us. The Sinners, the Tax Collectors, John's Disciples, the Pharisees, Jesus, they'd all look the same to us, and yet, to each other, their differences were insurmountable. There were lines that they couldn't cross, ways of living, expectations about what's appropriate and inappropriate, how relevant

God was for people in general and for each of them in particular, and how to live for God if he was considered relevant at all. Each group was the “other,” not “us” but “them,” and they were wrong, with a contagious wrongness.

Merciless: Us & Them

And I’ve been challenged by this. Who, from five feet away in the dusk of evening, looks just like me, yet I would say is nothing like me. What slight differences, differences that are largely unseen from the outside, make me think that it is inappropriate for me to go to them? I think it’s probably other middle class white people in their thirties who think differently politically, economically, theologically. Who hold different ideas of what’s “right” when it comes to trade policy, potty humor, or guns.

If imitating Jesus matters to me at all, those are probably the ones I ought to be most ready to show mercy to, rather than demand sacrifice from, and yet: I don’t want to go to those people. They drive me nuts, and I often think they are whacko, or that they just don’t realize as much about God as I do, or...you know, insert any other generically unChristian, prideful posture here.

And yet...which among us would say that’s good? It’s shameful. If we opened Matthew, we could identify with the sinners, or the tax collectors. If I were trying

to make us feel guilty, I'd figure out ways to help us identify with the Pharisees or John's disciples. But to identify with any of them is to excuse ourselves from the costly--at least to the boundaries we nurture between ourselves and others--yet appropriate demand to identify with Christ and act like he did. Jesus knew who he was, he knew who those around him were, and he had nothing to protect except his integrity as a merciful person.

The real question we have to ask ourselves, always, is who is just like us--who is just like you--who is, from five feet away in the dark, just like us, but who we would protest until the sun comes up that we're different from them, disagree with them, they're wrong. Because as far as Jesus models, it's those we're supposed to show mercy to.

Merciless: Different Answers

And here's the truth: It's the people who we're most like that we hate the most. They have a slight difference in their worldview: A slightly different answer to the question "Who are we?" or "Where are we?" They believe differently about "What's wrong?" or "What's the solution?" They think we're in a different time than we think we are. A time of opportunity or a time of despair.

We hate them, because they are them, not us, even though we're almost indistinguishable in dim light from

a distance. The only person a racist person hates more than someone from another race is someone who they think is betraying their obligation to racial purity. The only person a middle-class suburban conservative person has more derision for is a middle-class suburban liberal. Whatever those identity-laden terms mean

I want us to watch who we hate, who we deride, who we dismiss, who we dehumanize. I want us to see who we have no mercy for. And it's easy: Who do we have no time or money for? Who do we believe "just doesn't get it." Because they don't. Us and them, we get things differently. Our view of the world is different. And Jesus says show them mercy.

And I hate that he does, because I just don't want to show mercy. And yet: I am called to be "kind and merciful," forgiving as I've been forgiven. I'm called to live up to what I've been taught, to "put off my old self," with its tricky desire to reject everyone who I think is a traitor to the best way to live, and instead "be made new in my attitude," and become like Christ. We all are.

So let me assume that being like Jesus, for all of us, is better than being like anyone else, and let me offer one thing we can do that is really two things at once: It both reveals to us just how similar we are to those who we think we're so different from, and allows us a

chance to offer mercy, even when we don't want to.

Here it is, in two steps:

Two-Step Toward Mercy & Clarity: Step One:

The first step is simple: Make friends with someone who you disagree with. Or, if what you disagree about is the use of prepositions, then make a friend of someone with whom you disagree.

Make a friend you disagree with. Make friends with someone who is unlike you. Someone who views the world differently than you, who comes out of a culture that is different than yours, speaks natively a language you don't speak. What they consider normal, how they view class, race, gender, religion, politics, economics, violence, fruit, meat, electricity, anything--it's different from yours, this friend you make.

And I'm going to suggest that in this case, make friends with someone who is actually like you in very nearly every way, except they hold an opinion or a belief that you think is nuts. You probably already know someone like this. If not, find them. It's not hard.

If we can't make friends with people who we disagree with, then that's probably its own problem. And don't go crazy, here: We don't have to seek out a jerk who thinks he or she is a prophet, or someone who is inclined toward antagonism for its own sake, or a

person whose opinions are self-evident truths.

Making friends whose definition of normal, taken-for-granted, is different than ours is the quickest way and nicest way (because they're friends) for us to see our own worldview, and see ourselves, clearly.

Two-Step Toward Mercy & Clarity: Talking

Step Two doesn't happen without Step One. But it's easy. Just talk. Talk and talk and talk. Friends talk about stuff. Friends are vulnerable and authentic. Friends force each other to deal with their differences, because they care about one another, and if we make friends with people who are different than us, our conversations are going to be particularly challenging to how we perceive what we've taken for granted.

And as we talk, we can consider if the things we accept as normal, as given, as good-by-default really are good; that is, are they turning us into Christ, or turning us away from him? If our friends are Christians who care about us, even if they are Christians in a way that is very different than we are, we can even talk about this exact question, the question of if what we take for granted is helping us to become like Christ or inhibiting us from it. Remember, to be authentic is to force others to make judgments about us, and this happens in friendship. It happens as we talk about life with each other.

And we can talk about those great big questions that everyone's view of the world asks: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? What time is it?

We'll be tempted to freeze, or flee, or fight instead of be authentic. We'll be tempted toward murder instead of mercy. And even now, most of us are already wondering what we'll do for lunch instead of wondering how this could be useful in seeing how we see the world, could be useful in seeing through why we hate who we hate, when we're so, so much like that person.

I'm not hurt by that.

Conclusion:

Look, we're going to be talking about a lot of things in the next couple of months. We're going to be thinking about the critical judgments we have to make as Christians, and we're going to be forced to think about how we think. To question why we answer life's big questions the way we do. We're going to be tempted to hate people, and throw those who are just like us, except for the fact that they are fundamentally wrong, under whatever bus or heavy rock or punishing thing we can find. We're going to be tempted to fight, or freeze, or flee--topics, people, ourselves.

In all of this we've got to be willing to know that we

live in a world that God made, which is good. That we've been brought into God's creative, powerful work of restoring the world. That sin and death and the devil, though they stain so much, are nothing to fear for us, because until Jesus returns and sets the world right, we're protected by his power, his Spirit, his Church, and all the gifts of our heart and muscle and mind. Think about how you view the world. Think about who you have no mercy for and why, and just how much alike you might be apart from your beliefs and opinions. And seek out some way to see yourself correctly, even as you discover the way another person sees the world.