

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

*Open my mouth, and let me bear  
gladly the warm truth everywhere;  
open my heart and let me prepare  
love with thy children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for thee,  
ready, my God, thy will to see.  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine.*

This week, we conclude our sermon series, *Open Our Eyes* with the call to love all the people. As we followed the path of the old hymn, we were called to see all the people in week one, hear all of the people in week two and now, after seeing and hearing all the people, we make the Christ-like move to love all of the people.

It is especially appropriate that this series has taken place in a time that we are facing the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the protests that are erupting over the reality of systemic racism that we have ignored for far too long. The negative reactions have erupted in a crisis that could have been avoided or completely vanquished if we had just opened our eyes to see, opened our ears to hear, and opened our hearts to love... love all of God's children equally. And let me say, this series has proven timely because the messages that are addressed here aren't coming about because I am cherry picking from Scripture to prove a point. The scriptures that I have been following

in this series were chosen in the late 80's-early 90's time frame as the Revised Common Lectionary was being formed to give focus to the liturgical churches in their cycle of worship. It's almost like God has given a stamp of approval to the RCL. I have seen this scenario of the RCL scriptures speaking to the needs of the community time and time again throughout my ministry.

As we have moved through this series together, I have marveled at how so many of our issues could have been dealt with creatively if, *IF* we had just opened our eyes. If we had opened our eyes and really seen the people around us, perhaps we would have seen the systemic, institutionalized racism that was built into our societal structures in the aftermath of the Civil War with the invocation of the Jim Crow laws and policies that deprived generations of African Americans the basic right to become who they could become to the best of their ability. Instead, our society threw obstacle after obstacle in their path because we held onto the idea that there was something inherently superior about being white skinned. In our own Methodist heritage, we were founded with a strong abolitionist streak during the time when chattel slavery was king and fortunes were being made on the backs of men and women who were deprived of their God given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness all for the sake of a dollar. Our church divided over slavery in 1844, McFarland was part of the Southern church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and Simpson was part of the Northern Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church. When we began the process of re-unification in the years following World War I that led to the formation of the Methodist Church in 1939, we continued segregating our brothers and sisters of color by placing them in a separate Jurisdictional conference so that the white churches would not be subjected to the indignity of associating with the people of the black churches - a system that lasted legislatively until the union of the Methodists and the Evangelical United

Brethren in 1968 that formed the United Methodist Church. Even today, there are churches that balk at the possibility of having a female pastor that would have a stroke at the idea of a person of color in the pulpit. I will never forget the words of Bishop James Swanson during his episcopal address at Annual Conference a few years ago when he addressed the issue within Holston and warned that if he heard of churches complaining about not wanting a black pastor or a woman pastor they might be surprised to find that they were appointed a black female pastor and they would just have to live with it.

As we have moved through this series, I have wondered if we had just taken the time to *listen* to those around us... actually listened to their stories, heard their concerns and their dreams about what our world would be like today. Now, I will admit that I had a blind spot... a blind spot that was caused by the privilege that I was born into by being a white person in a southern culture that automatically gave me the benefit of the doubt. I'm a child of the 60's and 70's. I vaguely remember the Civil Rights struggle and I have a stronger recollection of the later years of the Vietnam War. I clearly remember in my hometown of Franklin, Tennessee that it seemed to be an easy transition to integration in the Franklin City Schools, but I vividly remember the protests that came about with the integration of the Williamson County Schools and the plans for bussing to achieve integration in the Metro Nashville Public Schools. I thought that it was an easy transition because that is the way that it looked from *my* perspective. It wasn't until years later that a black friend let me know how blinded I truly was to the hell that he and some other folks that I knew and were friends with endured during that time. The revelation was like scales falling from my eyes as I really and truly began to see beyond the narrative that I had grown up in.

This morning, we progress from seeing and hearing to the next step of loving... loving all of the people... loving as God loves us. Loving in the way that

Jesus came to teach us during his time with us. Loving without favor. Loving without exception. Loving others simply and for no reason other than they are children of the living God, living with the image of God, the *Imago Dei*, as the most essential part of their being.

The Gospel text this morning talks about hospitality. Yet, the Gospel text is not about the hospitality we *provide*, but about the hospitality we *receive*.

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (v.40). It sets hospitality as a standard of effectiveness. What are the proper metrics for judging the strength of a church or a ministry? We think it is numbers—how many? But what if it was in grace given and grace received? That is surely harder to measure, but it is significant, at least Jesus seems to think so.

Having called the disciples together in order to send them out, Jesus then warns them about the difficulty of the task ahead of them. “Sheep among wolves,” he stresses, “when they hand you over” (*when*, notice, not *if*) and “when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.” Wow, that makes you want to sign up, doesn’t it? Oh, of course, he says, “I’ve got your back. God’s got your back.” He’s numbered the hairs of your head, so don’t be afraid. Right? Never mind that they might have been numbered, but they are falling out at an increasing rate! Meaning, God’s got you, but that doesn’t mean you won’t suffer loss. But the loss isn’t eternal; the loss won’t define you.

Then after all that scary stuff, Jesus concludes these impossible mission instructions with these few verses on welcome, on being welcomed. “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...” To you, in other words, to the one who comes in my name. The little ones are the beginners, the ones just starting in faith, just making their first foray into the mission field.

But wait, then there is the “in the name of a disciple.” So, what is happening here? Is Jesus talking about the hospitality the disciples will receive as they go out to do what he sends them to do? Or is he talking about the hospitality that is done in their name? Is he talking about the effect of their mission? The only answer to these questions is yes. Yes, he is talking about the hospitality that the disciples receive, and, yes, he is talking about the impact of their presence on those they go to meet. He’s talking about the effect of loving the people enough to welcome and be welcomed.

Hospitality, like love, isn’t a one-off moment, a one-time experience. It is a way of life, a way of being and living in the world.

He is saying, it seems clear, that you will be welcomed if you are a welcoming presence; that you will transform lives, even if only in small, seemingly insignificant ways like offering a cup of cold water on a hot day, only if you are transformed yourself. It isn’t our words that bring this grace; it is our whole being, our whole presence.

That is why we can say, “we welcome everyone,” but not be welcoming in practice. We can say “everyone is invited,” but put up all kinds of barriers in how we interact with the stranger in our midst. We can say “everyone is included,” even while our attitudes and behaviors exclude as a matter of course. Opening our mouths must be preceded by opening our hearts.

Notice how Jesus never gives a script, never tells them what to say. “As you proclaim the good news” is as close as he gets to being proscriptive. The implication is that this good news is proclaimed as much through our living as through our speaking, as much through our attitudes and the disposition of our faces as through whatever words we might find within us to speak. Oh, speaking is important. We “must give an account of the hope that lives within us.” But the

ones who don't lose their reward are givers of cups of water not proclaimers of proverbs.

The hospitality we receive is related to the hospitality we give. The love we give is related to the love we receive. That's how this works. We can't scare people into the arms of God, but we can love them there.

We can't force people into the fellowship of the church, but we can welcome them there.

This text tells us that hospitality is not an add-on, not an extra in the busyness of our mission and ministry. It is core. It is what defines us. A quote sometimes attributed to the poet Maya Angelou is illuminating here: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

No matter who originally said it, we can all sense the truth in it. There is something significant in how we welcome and how we are welcomed. Jesus is telling the disciples that this road of making disciples, sharing the good news is a difficult one, but that there are blessings to be found on it. Often, those blessings are small and simple and likely to be overlooked. But if we open our eyes, open our ears, and open our hearts, we'll begin to experience those treasures in the kin-dom of God right here and right now.

*Open my heart, illumine me. Spirit divine.*

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son., and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.