

**Sermon - 9/16/18**  
**Big Hearted Theology**  
**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8:27-38**  
**17th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC**  
**Scott Kenefake**

As we are experiencing the rainfall this morning from what is now *Tropical Depression Florence*, I am reminded of the barrage of hurricanes we suffered through a year ago:

- **Harvey** that dumped more than 60 inches of rain on Houston and caused devastating flooding
- **Irma** that struck Marco Island, Florida, and then raced up the Gulf Coast
- And **Maria** which practically destroyed Puerto Rico

These were all huge, immensely destructive, deadly, late summer storms that were made worse (scientists tell us) by rising global temperatures and sea level rise.

And here we are again.

Inevitably, someone will ask (philosophically) in these circumstances:

How do we *rationaly* reconcile a God unlimited both in power and in goodness with the presence of evil, moral and natural?

But the problem with such questions (even though they may be interesting to some) is that they are largely *theoretical* (abstract) and not *practical*.

But the Bible is the exact reverse (practical rather than theoretical). The Bible has little or no interest in rational explanations regarding the origins of evil. *That evil exists is taken for granted*. The focus is on what God has done, is doing, and will do to defeat the principalities and powers of evil.<sup>1</sup>

And here is the important point: *God's past and present acts of liberation bestow upon the oppressed (anyone affected by evil) the freedom to fight against it—to act, to tackle the big issues that confront us*.

And we see this in today's scripture readings.

You see, Jesus's question, "*Who do people say that I am?*" elicits a variety of responses, only a few of which, I suspect, are enumerated in the text. Then Jesus gets personal, reminding his followers that faith is ultimately intimate. We are not saved by other people's beliefs. We find wholeness and vocation in claiming our own theologies and understandings of truth. These must ultimately become personal and relational, even if they are grounded in tradition.

"But, who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. Perhaps the disciples again provide a variety of responses, before Peter makes his magisterial affirmation: "*You are the Messiah.*"<sup>2</sup>

Like most such affirmations, Peter's declaration is the beginning of their conversation, not the end. Jesus wants his followers to consider the nature of his Messianic vocation. Jesus describes his vision—rooted in the "*suffering servant*" of Isaiah—by asserting that the Messiah must suffer and be killed. The initially perceptive

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1997 (Revised Ed.), p. 164

<sup>2</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, *Jesus' Lesson in Large Hearted Theology*, The Christian Century, August 14, 2018

Peter, still committed to traditional Messianic theologies, denounces this vision, leading to Jesus' rebuke: Peter is focused "*not on divine things but earthly things.*"

Jesus poses a *countercultural* understanding of divine power as relational and sacrificial. *Alfred North Whitehead* asserted that God is the fellow sufferer who understands. Less than two decades later, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* stated that only a suffering God can help. Such visions counter our images of God as all-powerful and all-judging. They also challenge images of a distant and apathetic God, untouched by the pain of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Process theologian, *Bernard Loomer*, described two kinds of power: *unilateral and relational*. *Unilateral power* builds walls, silences opposition, decides without consultation, and separates the world into us and them. It is willing to destroy the world in order to save a handful of sycophants. Bullying and bloviation characterize unilateral power.

In contrast, *relational power* leads by empathy, inclusion, listening, and receptivity. It transforms the world by a dynamic process of call and response, of adjusting—as good friends do, and parents—to the experiences of others. God saves the world by love and not coercion, by embrace and not alienation.<sup>4</sup>

But Jesus is not finished with his lesson. His words become even more countercultural: discipleship, too, is relational and sacrificial. Our theology ultimately shapes our actions. We become like the gods we image. The worship of a god whose power is *unilateral* often leads to theological and interpersonal bullying, to prioritizing dogma over relationships, and to the marginalization of the other. This *threatening god's followers* assume that anyone who opposes their platform is an infidel, unworthy of ethical consideration. Such leaders win the theological and ecclesiastical world at the cost of losing their souls.

*Relational* visions of God (however) encourage partnership, creativity, and inclusion as avenues for transformation. The quest for truth involves seeking the well-being of *all*, not a favored few.

And so, inspired by his embodiment of a relational God, immersed in suffering, Jesus challenges his followers to take up their crosses and embrace the pain of the world. Contrary to the world's focus on *individual success*, Jesus asserts that those who *hang onto their lives will lose them*, while those *who are willing to lose their lives will experience God's blessing*. This is not a matter of *martyrdom* so much as the *choice* to jettison the isolated ego in favor of a wider loyalty. Our self-serving attempts at *domination* lead to losing our souls. Jesus challenges us to become *big spirited* in our spiritual and relational lives, drawing circles that embrace *all* creation.<sup>5</sup>

For example, on February 1, 1960 (the Greensboro Four) *Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and David Richmond*--all were young black students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University--they were inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his practice of nonviolent protest, and wanted to change the segregationist policies of Woolworth in Greensboro, North Carolina. The plan was simple, but effective: the four men would occupy seats at the local Woolworth, ask to be served, and when they were inevitably denied service, they would not leave. They would repeat this process day in and day out, for as long as it would take. Their thinking was that, if they could attract widespread attention to the issue, Woolworth would feel pressured to desegregate.

Following store policy, staff refused to serve the black men at the "whites only" counter and store manager Clarence Harris asked them to leave. However, the four freshmen stayed until the store closed that night.

The next day, more than twenty black students, recruited from other campus groups, joined the sit-in. Students from Bennett College, a college for black women in Greensboro, also joined. White customers heckled the black students, who read books and studied to keep busy, while the lunch counter staff continued to refuse service.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Newspaper reporters and a TV film crew covered the second day, and others in the community learned of the protests. On the third day, more than 60 people came to the Woolworth store. A statement issued by Woolworth national headquarters said that the company would "abide by local custom" and maintain its segregation policy.

On the fourth day, more than 300 people took part. Organizers agreed to expand the sit-in protests to include the lunch counter at Greensboro's Kress store.

As early as one week after the Greensboro sit-ins began, students in other North Carolina towns launched their own. Winston-Salem, Durham, Raleigh, Charlotte, and out-of-state towns such as Lexington, Kentucky all saw protests.

The sit-in movement then spread to other Southern cities, including Richmond, Virginia and Nashville, Tennessee.

As the sit-ins continued, tensions started growing in Greensboro. Students began a far-reaching *boycott* of stores with segregated lunch counters. Sales at the boycotted stores dropped by a third, leading their owners to abandon segregation policies.<sup>[4]</sup> On Monday, July 25, 1960, after nearly \$200,000 in losses (\$1.7 million today), store manager Clarence Harris asked three black employees to change out of their work clothes and order a meal at the counter. They were, quietly, the first to be served at a Woolworth lunch counter. Most stores were soon desegregated.

Over *70,000 people* took part in the sit-ins. They even spread to northern states such as Ohio and the western state of Nevada. Sit-ins protested about segregated swimming pools, lunch counters, libraries, transport facilities, museums, art galleries, parks and beaches. By simply highlighting such practices, the students can claim to have played a significant part in the history of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, in God's world, *sacrifice* brings blessing, and *relationship* trumps hate. Losing our isolated, fearful selves leads to a world of diverse, beloved friends—and *hope* for a world affected by evil—*both moral and natural—by taking direct action against its root causes*. That's the *Big Hearted Theology* of Jesus!

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, *Greensboro Sit-Ins*