

Sermon 05.17.20
Easter 6, Year A
Acts 17:22-31. I Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Several years ago, I met multiple times with a committee of parishioners here at Christ Church in the early stage of the formal discernment process that led to me being ordained a deacon. During these meetings we each shared of ourselves and our own personal faith journeys, and the committee members were tasked with listening to me and to each other, as we wrestled with questions - both formal ones that were assigned as part of the process and those that came out of our talks. This was valuable time because it gave me an opportunity to get to know the people of the committee much better, and I still appreciate how they took their responsibilities seriously, the ways they challenged me to examine my faith and my personal gifts, and the loving encouragement they showed then and have continued to share through the years that have followed.

There was one question I have revisited again and again that a member of the committee asked during the session when we addressed the topics of my temperament, emotional health, and how I deal with conflict. In attempting to describe my reactions to frustrating or aggravating situations, I explained that as a rule I don't get angry - or at

least I don't normally react in a way that I would classify as responding out of anger. In general, I attempted to describe, when faced with problems, disagreements, or strife I try to figure out what has gone wrong and how that wrong can be corrected. As a follow up to how I described myself, a committee member asked me, with a good bit of disbelief and concern in their voice, "But don't you get angry when you see some of the terrible things going on in the world, the unfairness, the pain, the problems? Doesn't it make you mad when you see so many hurt people and things that are broken?"

My reply to this question at the time was to acknowledge that situations like those did get my attention and caused me concern, but I reaffirmed that I considered my reactions to most often be something different from anger, which I think of as being a heated, visceral, emotionally charged reaction. I remember saying that the fact that I don't react in anger doesn't mean I don't care about people or situations - it just might not be obvious to an observer the level of my concern.

The meeting moved forward to a different topic, but I replayed this particular exchange again and again in the weeks and months ahead because it got me thinking about my own personality and skills in the context of living a faithful life. Was my lack of anger or strong reactions to problems around me just a part of my personality or was this an indication

that I didn't really care about people and situations that didn't directly impact me? Did I need to be more forceful or vocal to be living a truly faithful life?

I started paying attention to the many different ways other people follow Jesus and what it looks like when they use their gifts in response to God's call to see if I could identify traits and actions of the most effective faithful people. As I'm sure you already know, Christians exercising their ministry do this in infinite numbers of ways - loudly, quietly, in leadership roles, through supporting activities, behind the scenes, out in front heading up movements to address societal changes, taking the time to listen to someone who needs to be heard, sharing a meal, offering kindness to a person who is hurting, speaking up when there is wrong being done, changing their own actions when they see they are causing pain. There is no one skill set or personality type that is ideal for Christian ministry, but there is something that is common to all of the ways we care for each other. Jesus shows us and teaches us that what is essential for living a faithful life is that what we do, we do with love - with love of God and love for each other. This love should flow through us as we engage with each other at all times and in all places.

This is not always easy, and we face many challenges to being able to respond in love to each other - especially when facing issues that

matter deeply to us. Both Peter and Paul, who we hear from and about in our readings this morning, are people who follow Jesus' call in their lives and spend the rest of their days proclaiming the Good News far and wide, turning their lives upside down to share the love of Jesus wherever they go. These two people have had life-changing encounters with Jesus - Peter as one of Jesus' disciples and Paul when he meets the risen Christ - and their work is so important to spreading the gospel to people in communities that are both receptive and hostile to the news they share.

We see examples of how each of them approach sharing their faith with other people. When Paul has the opportunity to speak in front of the Areopagus in Athens, he does not tear down his listeners for worshipping false gods or set up an adversarial relationship, instead he emphasizes the connections between all people through one God. Paul does not compromise what he believes when he speaks to the Athenians, but in this instance he chooses to inspire and connect instead of criticize and shame.

In a similar way, Peter encourages those who follow Jesus to be ready to share their faith with anyone, but to do it with gentleness and reverence. He is not advocating some type of watering down of the truth of Jesus, however. He urges people to avoid fear, to not be intimidated, and to be eager to do what is good despite the possible suffering that may come in response from those who do not believe.

Now, this passage from I Peter and some of the verses that come before have been used to pressure people into staying in abusive situations or accepting injustice and oppression as somehow being part of God's plan. It is not my belief that God wants people to simply cower meekly when they or others are being hurt and abused. That does not result in the kind of world that God wants for creation.

What I do think that this passage in I Peter and this scene in Acts emphasize is how we can respond when faced with people with whom we disagree, situations that are causing hurt, and conflicts in our community. The words and actions of Paul and Peter we have here all have at their foundation love of others and love of God. Instead of browbeating, insulting, retaliation, and revenge, Paul and Peter model treating others with kindness, honesty, truth, and compassion.

But as we all know, responding this way is by no means easy. Despite being someone who is not commonly moved to fiery anger, there are plenty of times when I find myself disappointed by the way people treat each other, frustrated by the pain I see around me, and ready to cut off people who don't seem to see or understand the problems and solutions the way I do. All too often my initial reaction is to want to strike back at someone or write them off as someone who just doesn't care. My first instinct is frequently filled with more estrangement and contempt than

it is with reconciliation and love. And from looking around at the way people treat each other in so many arenas when they disagree, I'm not the only one who struggles with maintaining or creating kind, loving relationships in the midst of disputes about deeply important issues.

Last week I was recommended a book by Shelley Carter, who is a parishioner at Christ Church, was the Senior Warden last year, and currently works at HOTEL INC here in Warren County. Shelley has pointed me to many great books in the past, and this recommendation was no exception. The book is titled "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World" by former Surgeon General of the United States, Vivek Murthy. This book explores both the ways people are lonely and disconnected in our current culture and how connections and relationships are formed and nurtured.

The section that particularly caught my attention as I thought about Peter and Paul from this week's readings was a section where Dr. Murthy discussed the general climate of distrust and division that seems to pervade our society. He referenced a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that used a term for cognitive bias called "motive attribution asymmetry." Now the term is fancy and may be unfamiliar, but the idea behind it is not. "Motive attribution asymmetry" occurs when we feel that our own beliefs are grounded in love while our

opponents' beliefs are grounded in hatred. This type of bias can result in visceral, righteous, contempt-filled reactions when we feel our motives are pure and those with whom we disagree are driven by hatred and makes building relationship and connection between people nearly impossible.

To counter this type of bias, which can make us blind to the presence of positive relationships, drain our energy, and cause us to feel disconnected with everyone, we can intentionally reach out to others in a desire for friendship and relationship. Dr. Murthy shares three steps to building connection that are used by John Paul Lederach who has been involved in peace-building work throughout the globe. They are - 1. listen to understand, 2. speak from the heart, and 3. stay at it, for the rest of your life, persist.

Although these steps were created out of political conflict resolution activities, they can certainly be applied to all types of personal interaction, and I can see the kind of love that Jesus embodies underpinning them all. These steps do not require that we compromise or hide our beliefs, but it does involve reaching out our hands in love to those around us, all of those around us, in an effort to continue Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.

At this time, when relationships and connection are hard to nurture due to our physical distance from each other and when loneliness is

experienced by many, when there is so much distrust and division running throughout our society, when we want quick fixes and answers for all that is wrong, may we remember the truths that in God we live and move and have our being, that Jesus has not left us orphaned but lives so we also will live, and that the Holy Spirit is with us forever, as our Advocate and helper. And may we find strength and courage in these truths to work to build loving relationships with each other and to stay at it, for the rest of our lives.