

17 September 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

Hymns:

**Readings: Romans 13.8-14
Matthew 18.15-20**

Sermon

Let us pray. Break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls, and may the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

We are welcoming folk of many different nationalities and Methodist persuasions today. We are welcoming the newly baptised, and those long journeyed in the Christian faith – we are from many different places and ways of life. In this room by quick calculation I count at least five millenia of Christian experience.

Think of that, and what a varied, beautiful gift you are in this city and the many cities and nations you call home. We are not a people without resources.

And before anyone wonders let me reassure you that these passages, Romans 13 and Matthew 18 are set for today in our lectionary – they were not chosen by me or anyone else to make a point or anything like that on this first Sunday that I am here preaching with you.

Which is not to say that in my paltry 40 odd years of Christian walk, I do not recognise their continued relevance in every healthy church of which I've ever been a part!

And so I have only one point today – in conversation with our scripture as I look around this house of prayer and marvel in delight to see all of you, and consider how great is the kingdom work that God has put in our hands.

That point is this: we are not called to be appropriate, but to be Christlike. We are called to something warmer than niceness – something more than the accommodation of evil.

And by evil, I mean to include both the slow-moving violence of poverty, race and sex privilege, loneliness. And also the chaotic turmoil of war and disaster.

Like you, I've been watching the progress of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose. Like you I've been watching the monsoons in south east Asia.

Friends, a hurricane or a monsoon is a neutral event, awesome in God's creation. I do not call it evil in itself though it wrest tree from earth.

But that a society creates a situation where the poorest homes have no flood insurance, where the poorest islands have the least infrastructure and earth-moving, road-repairing equipment – That societies starved of law are more likely to be starved of food and medical care – these are not neutral events. These are not acts of God.

And that our way of life and its pace means my compassionate heart is moved only as long as the media attention remains – this is no neutral event. No act of God.

These things are sin, and they are evil. Real people suffer because of them. Some here have painfully intimate knowledge of that suffering.

And my one point today as we bring the scripture to bear on the events of our week – we are called to something

warmer, more durable, more vulnerable than niceness in the face of evil.

Paul says – owe no one anything, but love. Jesus says, remain with one another, wrestle with one another when you harm each other. Still gather - even in your twos and threes.

Because here is good news from wherever we sit on the political, or theological, or ethnic, or sexual, or gender, or cultural spectrum today: one thing we do have is a remedy for sin. In our five millenia of collective Christian experience here in this room, forgiven people that we are, there is an answer to evil.

I come to this community as its new Superintendent minister most recently from west London, where I have served for the past eight years in Ealing – before that in Kettering and Corby in Northamptonshire in the British Midlands, and before that as a student minister in Handsworth and Lozells in inner city Birmingham.

I come as someone married, and divorced and remarried, someone quickened by the grace of God and called away from a career in teaching and research to this wondrous work which is the ministry of word and sacrament. I love

being a minister, and it is a delight to be called here to serve this community – but as much as I love and value the work, I will always believe that baptism is far more important than ordination in my life. The work of care, and service, and worship in which we are engaged together is the whole work of the community, not just the professional task of a few of us who have been set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. God doesn't outsource the means of grace, those Wesleyan priorities of mercy and piety, and we don't either.

During these years the Church has sent me to work in its leprosy colony in Uzuakoli, Abia state, in Nigeria - Cliff College International learning centre has sent me to teach and test the elements of our holiness tradition in the Methodist seminaries in Nigeria, and latterly in Sierra Leone – and I have continued to watch with interest the progress of churches in my home country the United States.

And I have yet to see a healthy church in all those contexts where the teaching in today's Epistle and Gospel is irrelevant. Owe no one anything but love.

Love your neighbour. Put on the armour of light, clothe yourselves in Christ – which by the way is to serve first – and that simple things, talk TO one another before we talk ABOUT one another - Here are lessons for real people in real churches – ones with normal folk like me who are as likely to get exercised over the politics of hymn choice and flower rota than poverty and injustice!

One of my favourite church signs, admittedly North American, has an unintentional pun - says in big letters – ‘Don’t let worries and anxiety kill you, let the church help!’ I once cut and pasted a little picture of this into a church meeting agenda, just for a giggle – after the meeting a dear soul came up to me and said ‘Jen, you should be careful, you know that can be read more than one way!’

Indeed! Don’t let worries and anxiety kill you, let the church help – and it should, and we do help one another - we have it in our capacity to be a healing balm for one another.

Leviticus 19:18 ('you shall love your neighbour as yourself') is quoted three times in Matthew's Gospel, more than any other Old Testament text.

We have it today quoted by Paul in the letter to the Romans – right before he reminds them not to judge one another. And it bears repeating.

And we have also today that other much quoted verse, probably more quoted in churches on the front door than any other – where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also.

Usually we mention that verse by way of apology that there are not more people in whatever cavernous sanctuary we find ourselves – not what it is about – rather about the discipline of community, that we don't get to do Christianity on our own, cannot do faith on our own without companions.

Not that some of us don't try.

They tell a story about a woman – a devout Christian, been to church every Sunday in her life - let's make it a woman, it might be a man – who is stranded alone on a desert island – fortunately with ready water and abundant supplies of fruit and grains she can eat – and

she is left on the island for some long time – five or more years.

Finally, they found her – they pulled in and dropped anchor, and indeed, this resourceful woman had built everything she needed, had made a very comfortable life on the island. One thing surprised them – considering the difficulty of building without tools, etc. – she had built not one, but two churches on the island, one at each end of her little compound.

One of them asked her why – ‘Ah, she said, that one down the other end of the green is the one I don’t go to.’

I spent my adolescence in a town in Massachusetts in the USA with two congregational churches, the one in the ‘hills,’ and the one in the ‘village’ and I wish I could say that the woman’s response was unusual for a devout Christians – no such luck.

The discipline of doing faith in community, when even just two or three gather, is hard work!

But here is more good news, friends we are equal to this work! We have within even this house the resources to stand against evil with so much more than nice!

Now, don't get me wrong - I am not condemning nice – Nice should be normal in our working. When it is warm civility. But as a foreigner I've noticed a certain kind of British English gets nicer, more polite, the more angry it gets?

Nice is not, when it is actually masking something much nastier, or when it marks withdrawal from one another, an avoidance of dealing with someone or something that might harm me, or someone else. Evil demands more than nice.

What we get in the Gospel today is reassurance that we will be able to address the great evils of our age – one broken heart and one broken relationship at a time. It is about the process of love during conflict, as it tells the truth about the gap between our reality in the world and God's intention for it.

So always, we begin at home. A question worth asking yourself is how do you hope to be changed by being part of this community? How do you hope to be changed by your home church community, if this is not your usual house of prayer – and how does your church change its community?

Because remember, we are not a people without resources!

And this tenacity in love and forgiveness is of course much more significantly about the engagement of churches in our communities.

This is about a remedy for the sin that means a small island in the Caribbean, or an Asian nation, is less able to deal with disaster than the Florida coast. This is also about a remedy for the sin that makes my United States Passport and British leave to remain a better guarantor of security and safety than many other documents and papers.

We hope and expect that a community, a nation is changed by the presence of churches, and for the better. Whether it is to heal the immediate threat of fascism in our streets or the temptations of unreflective protectionist policies in our own hearts. We are not meant just to open foodbanks and night shelters, but to end hunger and find safe home.

Here we will again and again learn grace and receive forgiveness ourselves. Here we remember the call of our

baptism, whatever our work for money or way of life – you beautiful people, whom God has richly gifted!

Over soup, and tea, and across this table in broken bread and poured wine, with word and song God feeds us. God is faithful.

I had one point in this first sermon with you – one only. Owe no one anything but love – we are not called to be appropriate, but to be Christlike. Warmer than nice as we are about our work. All this, the freedom of grace is already ours.

So whatever this week throws at you, keep hold of the promise that Jesus makes his people – I will be with you. Keep hold the promise that God is not done with us yet, that God is loving us and creating us a people of praise, and justice.

And when the day of heartbreak comes, the day when trees are wrest from the earth or nations fall, we do not stand alone, but side by side. We will stand in our twos and threes in the armour of light, and God will stand with us.