

Sermon - 02/16/2022
Ps 36; Is 62:1-5; 1 Cor 12:1-11; Jn 2:1-11
You are the Sign of Christ's Kingdom

The poet Mary Oliver once said, "You can have the other words-chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I'll take grace. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'll take it." (humoropedia.com)

Reading Oliver's poems, it seems to me she offers us moments of recognizable joy. Joy in nature, joy in relationships and joy in divine presence. Yet, this poet from the American Midwest was not religious; she was not a Jesus-follower. Still, she has seen and heard and felt the presence of the Creator God, in my opinion. I am convinced by her words, not by her lifestyle. The most amazing signs of God's Kingdom are in the world today. God-given gifts are everywhere, even in the midst of loss, decay and decline.

Today we celebrate Jesus' first sign or miracle. At a wedding in Cana, Jesus' mother calls Him out to give support to the bride groom at the feast. The poor guy has not calculated accurately the amount of wine needed for the party. Jesus takes plain water (also known as Adam's wine) and transforms it into very good wine – red wine I presume, I do not know. Remember, Mary of Nazareth had experienced a miracle in her own self – in her very body some thirty years earlier. She had pondered in her heart this Son of hers – who and what He is. He is the Son of God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Now He is the resurrected One here with us always. And we are to ponder in our hearts how Messiah comes to people who are Forsaken and Desolate, as Isaiah tells us.

What Jesus did and said while He was in this world of ours continues to impact us – and in Him we impact one another. The promise Jesus made to His people is true: the impact of the church will not fade or erode or lose its power over the decades and centuries, so long as we lift up Jesus for the world to see. We are the sign of His Kingdom.

I read again the passage where Jesus speaks to the church in Philadelphia:

"And to the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." (Rev 2:7-8 NRSV)

This is the church Jesus approves of. They are not puffed up. They make no claims except that Jesus lives and rewards those who seek Him. And for these people trying to be the church in the city of Philadelphia, Jesus opens a door that no one can shut. Our door is propped open! We can pray together to be like the church at Philadelphia as we envision the future of Banks Community Church. Jesus is faithful. Everything is in its right place. We are free to share our wonder and delight in Jesus.

So, this is not about growth in influence or numbers or income. No, this is about getting the Gospel right inside ourselves. This is obedience to Jesus, the Living Word.

Ann Lamott, another eccentric person of faith, tells the story of Ranola and Ken (from her book, *Traveling Mercies*). Ranola was a devout pillar of the church in the day. She was weary of Ken, a gay man who was a member of the church. She had been raised to believe that his life was not pleasing to God. Ken was dying of AIDS. He had been too ill to make it to church, but one Sunday he returned to worship, though he was unable to stand up for the hymns. During the singing, Ranola watched Ken with a cool eye, his face contorted in a combination of illness, pain and joy. Then suddenly, Ranola's face took on the same expression as Ken's. She went to his side, lifting his body up next to hers, his weakness resting on her strength, and vice versa. Ranola's fears melted, as both she and Ken began to cry. In that moment, they found shelter and hope, resting together in the shadow of God's wings... [(Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 99-105-from *Feasting on the Word*)]

Recently, a resident of the city shared with me her discovery that our church is doing great work with people. This

(Continued on next page.)

always involves doing things in the name of Jesus, for His sake – to His glory. This neighbor of ours is very excited to be able to come and volunteer here to serve the people. She is thrilled to have her children involved in this ministry as well. This movement into joining the work of the church is a sign of Christ's Kingdom.

My senior pastor in Albuquerque said, "When the local church gets it right, that's where true ministry happens." I still agree with him. We don't have to pretend to be important or to compete with others. We follow Jesus as faithfully as we may. He plants gifts and graces in us for living out the warm welcome so everyone can see Jesus and meet Jesus and get acquainted with Him right here where we live.

"God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

- wise counsel
- clear understanding
- simple trust
- healing the sick
- miraculous acts
- proclamation
- distinguishing between spirits
- tongues
- interpretation of tongues

All these gifts have a common origin, handed out by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when." (1 Cor 12:4-11 MSG)

Your take-away today is more good news – you are a sign of Christ's Kingdom. Jesus shines out of your acts of worship, your acts of mercy and your obedience to Him each day. John Wesley gave us only three general rules for faithful living: "Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God."

So we share the grace of Jesus, and spread Scriptural holiness across the land – even a land parched by drought and blasted by terror, fire and storm. Amen.