

September 27, 2020 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 25:1-9, Philippians 2:1-13

Rev. Jen Nagel, Ann Beane, Stewart Herman, Beth Ubbelohde

Matthew 21:23-32

University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jen: Let us pray: May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God of our salvation. Amen.

Jen:

This morning our sermon is a dialogue shared by three members of our Gratitude and Generosity Team.

Now here at University Lutheran Church of Hope, a few years back, what we typically call Stewardship, we began calling Gratitude and Generosity.

Our Gratitude and Generosity Team invites the whole congregation to consider the gifts for which we're grateful, and the ways we in turn practice generosity.

Today I'm grateful for the leadership and reflection of these three co-preachers:

Ann Beane, Stewart Herman and Beth Ubbelohde.

This group got a challenge this morning with the scripture passages before us.

As you may have guessed (!) we didn't handpick these passages. They are tough!

Rather these are the assigned scriptures for the day.

This group has spent time over the last weeks listening for God's Word in and through them, and discerning how these passages might lift up gratitude and generosity.

The first thing we noticed is that they are messy, they are complex passages.

Ann:

In the passages that we hear each Sunday, they can feel disconnected and confusing. I for one, am sometimes frustrated reading them, even to the point of thinking they aren't helpful. . But if I stay with them, God finds a way to speak to me. Lately, I've been more of the mind that God's work is definitely messy, not this "all in order and in its place" thinking. Christ brings peace and hope, not fear. God can transform Biblical mess into sacred meaning and action.

So, that's one kind of messiness, where we have trouble understanding the text. But there is another kind of messiness that has to do with the world and how we understand the world in light of the scripture.

Right now we're experiencing messiness, we're feeling squeezed with the challenges of the pandemic, racial injustice, climate change and more. The four of us decided to stick with these not so connected Bible passages and delve into how they relate to the world's tension. We found there was a message that spoke to us about our struggling world, specifically about how important stewardship is in the life of University Lutheran Church of Hope. We have had our own challenges here at Hope in

issues such as marriage rights, ordination, social justice, housing insecurity and neighborhood and city tensions we've experienced this summer.

AND in the midst of this, we are fed a wide divergence of messages, but we continue to struggle, dialogue and keep Christ at the center. We keep Christ at the center of the mess.

How do you cope with these two kinds of messiness? What helps you to transform mess into peace, healing and wholeness? A personal way for me to think of why I give of my time and talents comes from the messiness of the cross. Mess turns into joy in God's triumph over death. In gratitude and thankfulness I give back.

Jen:

So today we hear these two kinds of messiness that Ann described, spread over three passages. Let's look at each passage.

Stewart: I've long struggled with the Philippians text, which says we are to follow Christ in emptying ourselves, looking out for others rather than ourselves. But the text talks about self giving in a way that makes no room for self care, and that's tough.

Beth: The Psalm selection for today, 25:1-9 holds a beautiful message filled with hope and God's promises for us, God's grace. But, this too can be difficult to discern in the context of what is happening all around us today. It can be a struggle to believe this message when one is overwhelmed with day to day stresses of keeping a roof overhead or feeding the family, especially now when so many more people are facing severe economic hardships and other major stressors during the COVID 19 pandemic. In my mental health work I come in contact with hopeless, desperate people who don't believe this uplifting message is for them.

Stewart: The Matthew text is tough, too. Jesus is in pretty severe conflict with temple authorities. His back is against the wall, the authorities are trying to kill him. How can we relate this nasty confrontation to the gratitude expressed in Ps 25, or the generosity of self-giving love that Philippians commands?

Jen:

Thanks for naming these difficulties.

Our Gratitude and Generosity theme this fall is Hope Endures.

Even in challenging times, even in the complexities of our lives and our world, Hope Endures.

God's hope endures, and this faithful community called Hope endures.

Last Sunday Linda Herman got us thinking about gratitude and invited us to share our gratitude for this congregation in the chat line.

She read many of these and it was powerful to hear one another's experiences and reflections.

In a few weeks Eric Ringham will be our stewardship preacher.

Around that time you'll receive more information by snail mail and email about pledging, making commitments for continued giving to God's ministry through this congregation.

We'll be making decisions and turning in pledges later in October and early November.

On All Saints Day, Ann Wagner will share a Gratitude and Generosity moment.

All of this has a theme, a focus, of Hope Endures.

So, preachers, now that I've shared some background about our process and our theme, tell us what you hear going on in these difficult passages:

What do you hear that can help our community of faith dig more deeply into stewardship this year?

Stewart: In struggling to understand the Matthew text, It helps me to think of who Jesus was. I've always been drawn to Jesus before his ministry – when he was a tekton, a craftsman of some sort, in wood or stone.

To be a tekton, you need to know the materials you work with. In church we experience this knowledge as gifts. Think of the gifts which bless our congregation. Ken Lynes knew electricity and how to make it flow. Bryan Kufus knew building materials in constructing the bread oven. Sharla Aaseng knows the makings of bread. Pauline Hendrickson knows fabrics when designing banners. Zach knows the human voices he blends into the choir.

And this helps me with the difficult Gospel passage about his conflict with the Temple authorities. They asked Jesus an impossible question: by what authority do you preach and heal? To answer, Jesus had to draw on his knowledge of them, as the human material he was trying to reach. He knew they believed themselves to be guardians of the law--but also that they were rigid and judgmental. He knew that if he responded with the simple truth--that God empowered him with the Holy Spirit--they would have nailed him for blasphemy. So he cleverly evades their trap by pointing to John the Baptist, who was beyond the reach of their power to punish.

Isn't this story an example of Philippians 2, as well as a message for all us Tektons? Jesus does not claim glory for himself, but points beyond himself, both to God and to John the Baptist. Our own gifts emerge as they are put to service for a good beyond our own glory. The bread oven stands ready in the parking lot to offer bread to our neighbors, if the pandemic ever eases. The choir reaches beyond itself to enrich the entire listening congregation. Surely there remains much potential here to live beyond ourselves.

Ann: When I heard Stewart use the word Tekton, I chuckled when I thought he was referencing a Star Trek or Star Wars movie. We have an abundance of Tektons here at Hope. Stewart mentioned a few and I would add to that the Sunday School leaders, sanctuary and racial justice members, garden and green team members, quilters, youth leaders, and so many more. These many ministries are sustained through generous gifts of time and money. I'd invite each one of you to think of yourself as a Tekton, as we move through this Gratitude and Generosity Stewardship time.

Jen:

I so appreciate this image of a tekton that you lift up, Stewart.

And I appreciate, also, the way you two, Ann and Stewart, have invited us to think of ourselves as tektons, as people with gifts and skills, crafts people, if you will.

So my question for all of you, the whole congregation, is this:

How do you make wise choices about spending money and time, and sharing your skills and gifts and spirit?

This stewardship season is a perfect time for discerning how we can be a good steward of our gifts.

These are conversations best had with trusted friends and companions, within community.

They are ripe for our prayers.

They invite us to reflect on our values, our energy, our passion, our calling.

One of the functions of the church is truly to make space and time for us to reflect on our gifts and the needs of the world.

Beth, can you share a bit how we tektons can be nourished while practicing our craft?

Beth: Psalm 25 is all about how hope endures. The Psalm proclaims that we lift our souls up to God and put our trust in God to protect us. We ask God to teach us and show us the way. All these things we are asking of God; truth, mercy, love and most importantly salvation have been promised. We trust in God and are grateful for these gifts.

We can connect this gratitude to what we are experiencing in our lives today, specifically in the life of our Hope community. Yes, there is gratitude even in these frightening unprecedented times of worldwide pandemic, racial inequality, crushing economic recession and uncertainty. Our gratitude and God's grace help us to get through this. We do have the certainty of God's love and salvation and in terms of our lives at ULCH we have the good news of our financial stability and the ways in which our ministries here continue to do good work despite the limitations we face while we social distance and limit face to face interactions. We have gratitude for our gifted and capable leaders, staff and for the contributions from congregational members to our many ministries, ensuring that we continue to do God's work. This is what inspires me and it's why I serve on this team and contribute financially to our Hope Community.

Jen:

Thank you, Beth and Stewart and Ann, for your courage and wisdom in sharing this morning.

You've named honestly the messy parts of these passages.

God's word isn't handed to us on a platter, but rather we can struggle together, chew on it.

You've done that, and our line about Complex World, Thoughtful Church, rings true.

Thank you for not only naming the difficulties, but also for helping us hear and see God's grace in the passage, and in our lives.

And, thank you, church, for your faithfulness, your enduring Hope, your labors of love--they are abundant.

Your commitments of time and prayer and money make this ministry possible.

We pray that today's dialogue sermon is food for thought, that it helps us grapple more deeply with how we live faithfully with all that we've been given.

And let the people say, Amen! Amen.