

Repentance and Reconciliation

January 26, 2014

Shepherd's Grace Church

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.(Matt. 4: 12-23)(also read 1Cor. 1: 10-18)

For the next few weeks we are going to be reading Paul's first letter to the Corinthians alongside Matthew's gospel lessons. Paul addresses several issues in this letter. Today he is talking about quarreling in the congregation. Paul says we should all be of a like mind. You know Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church would agree with Paul. Reverend Phelps is more than willing to tell you exactly what that mind should be and exactly how you are to live into it! So would many other preachers in many other pulpits today! I mention Reverend Phelps only because he is an extreme example to whom we can all relate because he shows up in the news so frequently around here.

The danger we face is that many people are willing to be of like mind with us as long as we are of like mind with them! The pulpit and the sermon are only a couple of examples of that. Because they are examples, I frequently remind you that when you come to worship here or any other place you should not check your brain at the door. You should come to listen to a message prepared to engage that message with what you know from Scripture and with what you know from life! If a messenger is offering you only one position that is right and with that right being the only choice you should allow your mind to engage that position and ask, “is this right for me?” Does this square with what I know from my life, from my prayer life, from my relationship with God. The process has a name. It is one of

those 50 cent theological words called hermeneutics. It is a system of conversation we have with ourselves that asserts our own value system into the decisions we make in our everyday lives.

The apostle invites us to engage in that conversation today when he invites us to be of like mind! At this point, you should ask, "Have you lost your mind?!" You just spent five minutes arguing that we should not check our brains at the door and then you said we should be of like mind. How can both these things be possible? How can we agree on an issue and challenge the validity of that issue? It all comes down to this question which I hope you will consider this morning as you listen. I hope you will take it home with you and consider it some more. I hope you will discuss it with your friends! I hope it will trouble you enough that you will allow it to be part of the way you choose to live the rest of your life! That is an ambitious question! Here it is. "What does it mean to be of like mind?"

As I was reading this week in anticipation of our conversation this morning, I came across a comment by a now famous author of non-fiction. The author said that his early work had not always been as popular as his current work. He said that at the release of his first book there was to be a book signing and autograph session along with a presentation of his thoughts on the work. He entered the hall that had been reserved for the event and strode confidently to the podium. He turned and looked out over the seats only to discover that all were empty except one. Far in the back row sat a single woman waiting for his presentation. He invited her to move up closer and the woman responded saying, "No, thank you. I might want to leave early!" What does it mean to have a like mind?

At reading that story, I wondered about some of you and whether you choose the back row of our congregation because you might want to leave early. Then I thought through the configuration of our sanctuary and realized that the easiest places to leave early from are actually the ones at the front. It helped me relax a bit to recognize that you sit in the back so you can show your genuine support! You are there and you are going to stay there! Thank you! Thank you for coming prepared to engage, for coming prepared to stay for the "whole thing!" Thank you for being prepared to think and for anticipating something to think about!

One of the things the message of today's gospel lesson invites us to think about is our level of commitment to Christ! "What does it mean to have a like mind?" One thing it might mean is that we have an unfailing resolve to seek the Lord. Scripture tells us, "Seek Him where he may yet be found and He will not keep Himself hidden from you!" To be of like mind means we simply cannot be like the woman at the book signing. We cannot sit looking for a place to bail out. We cannot be looking for an opportunity to leave early! We must be "all in" in our quest for Christ! We must be committed to searching him out and seeking all He has to share with us! We must look diligently and we must be willing to dig deeply not only into his life but into our own in order that we find him! To be of like mind means that we are all committed to ourselves and to each other to look for the Lord in every aspect of our lives and to look together!

Today the Lord withdraws to Galilee. We must go there with him. In order to go, we must understand what that means. We might read the word withdraw and think retreat. John has been arrested and we might think Jesus is afraid. We might look back to the time when the Lord told Joseph to take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt so the child might be protected. Perhaps this is another of those times when Jesus seeks protection so that he too is not subject to the prolonged persecution to which John is now subjected. We might be comforted by the descriptions of where the Lord flees to. He goes to Capernaum by the sea. He goes to a beach front resort to rest and relax and be restored. We think Jesus is going on vacation! At the very least we think He is retreating to a place less visible than Jerusalem so that His activities might not be so noticeable.

To be of like mind means that we understand the significance of His withdrawal. To understand, we must first listen to what happened to John. John was arrested. In Greek, the word would be more commonly translated "handed over." John was handed over because he was different! He wore clothes of camel hair. He ate wild locust and honey! He preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins! He spoke out against the Pharisees and the Sadducees! He was arrested because he was critical of the status quo and sought change to the system of oppression that was so solidly entrenched in the Hebrew system of worship! John spoke out against the Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptists and the closed-minded people of religion who continued to keep people from finding the truth about God and God's desire to be in relationship with them.

Jesus withdraws to Galilee not to escape this kind of persecution but to ignite a ministry strong enough to withstand it! Galilee, Capernaum by the sea is not a place of peace and contentment, but rather a place where the problems of the day can be most clearly seen. It is a place of Roman and religious oppression. The puppet ruler there is a Jew who has sold out for security and comfort and the government is securely under the administration of the Roman Empire! There is no tolerance in Galilee! Jesus' withdrawal to that place places Him not away from but squarely against the same status quo that handed John over. It places him squarely against those who will want to hand him over later! It places him squarely against those who might have a like mind. It places him in the region of the valley of the shadow of death! To withdraw with Jesus to Galilee places us there too! "What does it mean to be of like mind?"

Another thing it means is to understand the risks of being "Of like mind." We willingly follow Jesus to Capernaum when we think it is a place of peace and rest. We willingly follow when we apply our own understanding of what He means when he says "My yolk is easy and my burden is light." How willing are we to follow when we understand that we have now placed ourselves squarely against the preconceptions of a society that willingly and purposefully subjects others to the persecutions of objectification and disdain?

Galilee of the gentiles is where we are asked to go. Galilee of the different is another way to express that destination. The gentiles are the less than. The gentiles are the “others” who are heathen in their beliefs. The gentiles are the “less than” of our society. At this point we might want to say, “Yes! We are all in for the poor! We are all in for the hungry! We are all in for the naked!” However we must remember that Jesus was all in for the all! Are we all in for the all? Are we in for all people? Are we in for women?

Women in our society today are objectified in virtually every aspect of social situation. When we look at a billboard how frequently do we see women objectified for their sexuality in trying to sell something. Men are objectified also but more than 80% of the advertising media today uses women posing provocatively in an attempt to cause men and women to respond. The sexual implication is acquisition by association. We are made to believe that if we buy what the advertiser is selling we can then have the object that goes along with it! Human sexuality is sacred to God! Over and over again in scripture we find God pointing to the very issue of creation He intended in Genesis 1. “Male and Female God created them! In God’s own image and likeness God created them!” Equally God created them! Equally God created all of them! Not just the Jews, but the gentiles as well! God created them! Not just the men, but the women as well! God created them! What does it mean to be of like mind?

Often we as Christians see those whom we serve. We are willing to give to those whose need we can actually perceive. I wonder how often we fail to see the need of those who walk among us. What message do we send to our daughters when we tolerate the images the world portrays for women in our world? Do we tell them it is ok for them to be thought of as parts, as pieces which are desirable only for their use and gratification? Do we accept that because our daughters are born women, it is acceptable for them to be treated as less than whole? The last half century there have been tremendous strides made in giving equality to women in our society. Wages have come closer to “on par” with mens. Women now make 78 cents for every dollar men make doing the same work. Women are now occupying more top management positions in the workforce. They now occupy over 3 percent of all the C.E.O. positions in fortune 500 companies. Exactly what message are we sending our daughters about their ability to participate wholly in our society. What does it mean to be of one mind?

What message does it send to our sons when we continue to participate in and perpetuate the notion that women are to be used for what they can accomplish by their looks? When our young men are bombarded by ad after ad on the internet where they now spend an overwhelming amount of their time, on television where they see photo shopped image after altered image to the point where they begin to believe that is how most women really look, in print where they are invited to ogle and stare at images that are false; what do we expect our sons to determine for themselves as the place for women in our society. In Exodus 20, we learn that God grew angry with the people because they created false images. Do we really believe God wants false images portrayed of that which God created in God’s own image and likeness? What message are we sending to our young men about the importance of the

other when we continue to find ways to diminish the other and re-create it in our own image and likeness? What does it mean for us to be of one mind?

In the world we live in today, where women are diminished and where men are taught that objectification is the acceptable norm is it any wonder we are confused about our sexuality? In the world today where we walk among others who are thought of as inherently "less than" is it any wonder that some are moved to those who appear to be the same as them? Is it any wonder that some are ostracized and moved to the very margins of our society because of the sexual choices they make? Is it any wonder that those who look the same as us but struggle with differences because of gender and confusion and perhaps even because of genetic differences which we can not see are driven to the very margins of our society where they are given little or no voice and when they are heard they are diminished because their thought is not consistent with the thought of the center?

We are created in the image and in the likeness of God! We are all created in the image and in the likeness of God! We are collectively created in the image and the likeness of God! No one of us or no group of us can claim the totality of that image and likeness. That is where Fred Phelps and I would part company. His message is that he has the right information and the only way to process that information. My message is that we all have the right message but we only have it when we listen to others and recognize their truth is universally linked to our truth! When will we realize that our strength is in our difference! Our solidarity must be in our difference. We must all, all of us bond together to fulfill the purpose for which we were created. We were created to be the image and likeness of God so that we might be in relationship with God, all of us, and so that we might be in relationship with each other, so that we might love one another even as God has loved us! All of us! What does it mean to be of one mind?

Jesus withdrew to Galilee not so he could escape the other, no so he could escape the persecution by the religious elite, not so he could escape the oppression of the ruling elite but so he could actively engage it! Isaiah prophesied in chapter 9 of his writings that this was going to happen. It was part of God's plan from the very beginning that the Word would be brought to all the people, first to the Jews and then to the gentiles, to all people. Jesus went to the place where darkness and oppression were so prevailing that they perpetuated no promise, no hope, no life! In that darkness he brought light! As John said in his gospel, the light came into the world and the darkness could not overcome it! Jesus brought light and the light illuminated even the places where the chosen people previously believed there was only darkness! Jesus reached out to those who were unreachable, those who were others! He reached out to a system that was broken and he offered a fix!

How did he offer a fix? As he walked along the sea, he saw those who were mired in the system! He saw Peter and Andrew, James and John. They are described to us as fishermen. What we should know about them is that they are not casual fishermen. They fish for a living! In the 21st century we might

think that is a romantic and desirable profession. I have watched “Deadliest Catch,” have you? I have seen the exploits of those who make their living on the sea. I have seen the risk they take and have observed the growth of the rookies into experienced and seasoned sailors! I have found myself on the edge of my seat and the captains tried to outwit one another to see who could make the biggest haul! Have you?

I think sometimes that is the image we have of the first four Jesus calls in his ministry according to Matthew. We think they are devil may care swashbucklers like the three musketeers or the merry men of Robin Hood fame who “take from the rich and give to the poor! This picture could not be farther from the truth! The truth is they are part of the economic system of oppression that permeates the entire lives of the people of Capernaum in the first century. As fishermen, they are taxed on their boat, they are taxed to put their boat in the water, they are taxed on their catch, they are charged fees for cleaning their mess and they are taxed on the sale of the catch they make! There is a charge for every aspect of their business and they barely make enough to feed their families! They are oppressed and they are thought of as the very least of those who try to make a living in Israel. They are considered on a par with “tax collectors.” These are the ones Jesus chooses to be in ministry with!

Jesus chooses them not for their position in the community but for their willingness to respond to his invitation. He calls! They Respond! That is the expectation Matthew has of his congregation. They are to hear the call of Jesus and respond. How are they to respond? Immediately! Immediately they are to repent! That is the nature of the call. Repent! Jesus says, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Repent—turn away from, change direction, change your mind! Jesus call is not to an instant education and edification, but to a commitment to something different! His call is to repentance! His call is to change! What does it mean to be of one mind?

Part of what it means is that together we demonstrate a willingness not to accept the status quo. Part of what it means is that we recognize in ourselves the evil of the worldly system of objectification and we begin to change, to repent, to turn away from and to think of that which might be different. Part of what it means is that we begin to see first ourselves as whole and then others as whole. Part of what it means is that as we think of “loving our neighbors as ourselves” we begin to recognize that we, ourselves are worthy of great love and as we recognize this we can finally begin to love ourselves! When we see worth, when we see wholeness in ourselves, we can see worth and wholeness in others! We can begin to appreciate others for all of who they are and not just for their parts. We can look past the glamorous pictures painted by Madison Avenue and we can see the real beauty of people created in the image and likeness of God!

Jesus teaches this! He teaches this by withdrawing to a place of conflict and addressing that conflict where it exists. He does not sit in his office somewhere, he goes out into the neighborhood, into the synagogue, among the people and there he cures their sickness and heals their disease! There among

the people he invites the dawn of the church. He uses those who are part of the system to allow others to see that there is a possibility for the system to change, for people to put God and others ahead of their own needs and to recognize the benefits of such action. He does this not only by transforming the lives of the four he calls, but by living the example himself!

Jesus puts the needs of others ahead of his own needs. Matthew portrays Him as one who was born into the world to "Save His people from their sins." He saves them, he saves us by taking all our sins upon Himself and sacrificing his very self, his very Godliness, His own wholeness for each one of us so that we might become worthy of standing in the presence of the God who creates us in His own image and likeness and being worthy to once again be in relationship with Him! This is the life Jesus withdraws to! This is the life that invites us to be of one mind with one another!

Jesus does not call us to abandon all we have. Even though Matthew portrays James and John as leaving behind their father, Jesus does not call us or them to abandon their family. The example today is an example of that which is spoken by the prophet Isaiah. "See, I am about to do a new thing. The former things have passed away! Now do you not perceive it! Do you not receive it? There will be water in the wilderness! There will be flowers in the desert!" Matthew wants us to know that we need to put our father's old and antiquated ideas and allow for the new. He wants us to know that there are different ways to view the world and that God is calling us to a new way! In that new way we are to invite our families, or fathers and our friends! What does it mean to be of one mind?

What does it mean to be of one mind? I hope you will consider the question today over your family meal. I hope you will consider it tonight as you lie down and that it will be on your mind tomorrow! I hope you will take it with you to work or to coffee or to the post office and talk about it with others and get their opinions. I hope as you consider it, you will carry it with you wherever you go! I hope it will become a pervasive and persistent question in your life. I hope it will nag at you as it does at me and that it will transform you into the people of God who when called will leave behind your nets and your boats and the former things. I hope you will begin to choose to look at others as whole and complete and that you will consider people not for what they appear to be but for what they truly are. I hope you will regard one another as people who have the power to become children of God, born not of the flesh and not of blood but of the will of God! I hope you will recognize that through God's gift of Jesus Christ you have been reconciled to Him and that at in that reconciliation you have been balanced, your accounts have been settled and that you are free!

Repent! You reconciled and redeemed child of God! The Lord has called you this day! Amen!