

Signposts

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Exodus 12:1-14

Romans 13:8-10

Signposts. When sisters and brothers come together from all walks of life, some old friends, some strangers making friends for the first time, it is a sermon in itself. We act out the gospel of Jesus when we come together for prayer, for service, for acts of kindness. If we could live it out the rest of our days with love in community, creating a home for every one and any one, we would have little need for words. Sharing together signs of Christ's body and blood-- of sacrifice, of love, of healing, of hope! Living friendship—living signposts.

The passage we shared this morning from the book of Exodus reminds us of the details of the first Passover meal—the blood of sacrificed lambs smeared on doorposts, as a sign of God's readiness to free the people. Strange signposts. When Jesus and his disciples gathered for what we mark as the beginning of the practice of Holy Communion, one Passover, they were sharing in a meal where they remembered God's deliverance of their captive ancestors, slaves in the land of Egypt. There on the evening before Jesus would be captured, he led them in a meal of remembrance of God's liberation. A reminder of the past; a signpost to God's future.

However this meal was different. Jesus invited those early friends—as he invites us—to rethink, re-imagine, re-do what the signposts of deliverance are all about. As he shared the common cup with them, he pointed them to a new promise. He invited them to a new covenant rooted in love rather than in Divine judgment and vengeance.

It's a lesson we who call ourselves Christian have had trouble learning. For so much of our religious history, we have talked about God as one who operates with a sharp sword of anger and justice...the psalm we recited this morning reflects the anguish and anger of Israel in ancient times, imagining a time when they would at last do unto their captors as had been done unto them... “to bind their kings in fetters and their nobles in with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed.” Now we supposedly enlightened 21st century types tend to write these sentiments off as primitive. But just consider what your friends have been saying lately about ISIS on the web or editorials have been saying about Israel and Palestine...one of my friends online, a normally peaceable soul, reacting to the recent execution of journalists by extremists, for example, honestly, spoke of vengeance. I can't imagine on the from another side, what it is to be a Palestinian Christian or Muslim, right now in Gaza, and the feelings I might have toward those who have sent missiles and bullets at civilian targets, killing innocent children. Be real. The desire for retribution is in each of us.

Before we judge harshly those who cry out for divine vengeance, we need to consider the reality of real suffering, and the natural feelings toward the oppressor or killer that grow out of these experiences.

And yet...at the table, Jesus called his friends and companions to a new way, the way of love rather than vengeance, the way of costly reconciliation. “This cup,” said Jesus, “is the new covenant, which is in my blood...”

Just yesterday, as we walked past my wife’s church in Guilford, I saw a physical signpost that sends a clear signal—an interfaith signal. A “peace pole,” it says in many languages on each side “Let peace prevail on earth.” Christ invites us, both as individuals and as little communities of the faithful, to create a new kind of signpost. Now the physical peace pole is well and good—it might even be worth considering popping one into our front lawn here at Emmanuel Friedens. And yet that isn’t the kind of signpost I am talking about today—nor is it all that Jesus had in mind.

I believe Jesus of Nazareth wanted human signposts, walking talking you and me signposts, smeared with the marks of love. And he wanted communities like this one, where the clearest sign of all was the constant gestures of genuine and costly love, one person to another, and all the members and friends toward the neighborhood and world around us.

For those signposts to really work—not in the sense of institutional growth but in the sense that they are real signposts of GOD’S love, the love has to be from the heart, and genuine, and deep, even as we need to confess it is an incomplete and often broken thing. Human beings are smart—they can tell when Love is genuine, and when it is nothing but a stage production. There is no substitute for authenticity.

What does genuine love look like to you? I invite you to close your eyes and think back to one person who has on some occasion or another embodied that love for you, in the sense of a deliberate life of faith, whether put in words or simply lived.... And now, with your eyes still closed, just say out softly the first name of that person....

To be able to live love on a consistent basis is not an easy thing. Some of us learn it from our parents; others haven’t had that luxury, we have had to learn it from other people, or even from God alone. I was talking with our recently departed Lily not long before she died. I asked her who taught her how to pray. Was it her mother? She looked at me like I was just a little crazy. “Jesus taught me how to pray” she said. Well for some of us there are no intermediaries. In this regard, Love is like prayer for some of us. Jesus, encountered personally, is the one who teaches us how to love, as well as how to pray.

Over the course of this fall, I want to reflect more with you about what it means to be signposts of love—one by one and together in community! But as we gather on this welcome home Sunday, some of us long time members, others of us almost brand new friends, let me start that reflection by saying a few things briefly:

- 1) Love is inherently personal; it is inherently from the heart. No set of rules or system of expectations will substitute for the real thing.
- 2) Love if it is real grows over time: however imperfectly it begins! Many of us here have known each other for many years: there is something beautiful in that, in the intimacy and caring of long friendships built on mutual experiences, even mutual conflicts, and certainly mutual care.

3) The love of those who follow Christ is radically open to new relationships, new friendships, new discovery. You can tell a real community of Jesus-folk this way! Not only are there long old friendships, but t those who are brand new feel like they have come home, because of the quality and depth and care of how they—you—are received. We are called to receive as Christ receives—without judgment, with radical welcome and hospitality! And we are called to the risk of new relationships, just as Christ entered into new relationships openly and freely.

Now you probably can name a lot more characteristics of genuine love. Paul says, for example, that it is the fulfillment of the Law. Matthew's gospel reminds us that genuine love – the God kind of love is offered to friend and enemy alike!

Love is a gift, not something we can work up—and so to be a community rooted in the kind of Love that Jesus taught and offered means being open to the gift, not trying to force through a new law of love.

As we come to the communion table today, come open to that gift. Come open to meeting God through the hand and heart of your neighbor. Come, ready to taste a new covenant...come ready to be turned into living signposts, of a new way of being.

This table is an ancient and still revolutionary signpost. Come to the table of Christ's love, Come to the place where vengeance is replaced with the searching Heart. For this is the Jesus table. Welcome home, to the family of God.