

“Embracing Our Future Right Now”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Mark 9:30-39

If I were to begin with the last words of the text, it would make a great sermon. I love when Jesus takes a little child and puts her, or him, among the crowd and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” As we start the program year, this verse offers fantastic guidance. Last week we did a training for our Sunday School teachers, giving teaching tips and making connections between the curriculum and worship. We have just instituted a child protection policy for our church; ours and hopefully many other churches are wiser after watching the failures of churches in protecting the children in their care, and our leadership has made a commitment to creating a culture where the community looks out for the safety of our kids and for those who lead them. We have members who bring their toddlers into the sanctuary, children who squawk in the moment of silence before the prayer and occasionally join me at the chancel to check out the action since they cannot see over the heads of people around them, like Zacchaeus who climbed the sycamore tree so many years ago. This verse reminds our church that the interruptions children bring to the worship service may in fact be God’s presence trying to break through; in welcoming them in all their unformed chaos, we are in fact welcoming Jesus Christ.

But instead of preaching that sermon today, I am going to ask that you look back toward Bethlehem. Find in your imagination that stable where a young woman birthed into existence Jesus, the Messiah. In the dim light of the stable, a manger cradles a small and vulnerable form. Now, look inside and instead of the vulnerable infant full of holy potential, let us see in the

creche the beginnings of the church. After all, we are told many times in scripture that the church-- the followers of Jesus-- makes up the body of Christ.

When Christians witness a baptism, we make vows that tie us to the care of the one being baptized. We become stewards of the infant, child or adult, both cultivating their power and tending to their vulnerabilities as they grow in God's love. It is a leap of faith to tend in the present someone whose future is unknown to us, but we do our best. We do the same for the church. Those gathered in the Upper Room with Jesus, sharing the Last Supper and promising to remember him in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, could have never anticipated how the church would grow and take shape-- from being an underground sect persecuted by the Roman Empire, to becoming the religion of empire, to becoming subject to the winnowing fires of Reformation, to becoming the global colonizer and religion of slaveholders, to giving subversive language to the enslaved that beckoned them towards their freedom. In our own state of New Jersey, we celebrate the history of those who brought Presbyterianism to this country in their search for freedom in religious expressions-- and we wrestle with the shameful tension of knowing that many of those forefathers were also slaveholders.

As for me, born a cradle Presbyterian in Atlanta, as I grew into my sense of call, the church denied my gifts for ministry because of who I loved. And so though I loved the church, I *left* the church... for a time. But the church lost me, and then the church found me. The church held me, then hurt me, then healed me. The hands of the church are capable of giving life, and of sapping life.

Jesus predicted to the disciples, "The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him." What was God thinking in putting the care of the Christ, and the care of Christ's church, in *human* hands?

Look at your hands. Our hands: body parts, yes, but also instruments of life and death. These hands have the capability of calling forth life: comforting a baby; greeting a stranger; feeding the hungry. But these hands are also body parts that can wield the instruments of violence and death. In Jesus' day it was the direct tools of violence: hammer and nail. Today we also have those direct means of violence: the trigger of a gun, or the button that will unleash weapons of mass destruction. But there are also the indirect ways our hands yield violence. In Jesus' day it was the exchange of coins that crossed hands: 30 pieces of silver. Today it is the stroke of a pen or computer key that exchanges wealth in ways that widen the gap between rich and poor. It is the press of the button in a voting booth that impacts lives far beyond our own, sometimes for better but sometimes for worse, and the stakes are high.

Where is the church in these times, and how will the church use its hands? Great leaders have stated that "the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice."¹ As a church, when we embrace the future my hope is that it is a future that bends the right way. As a church, I want to say that we can be the drum majors for justice rather than playing catch-up to a beat that has already marched on ahead of us.

So much feels broken about our present. But what we can create by coming together as Christ's body, the church, has the capacity to heal what is broken. In this sanctuary, we proclaim hope and we proclaim healing. This message does not stay in our walls but it goes to places like First Friends, when Eulalia brings the stationary you have given her to the detained immigrants who long for connection with their families. It goes into our schools, when our children take the lessons they have been taught in Sunday School and rehearsed in worship, and live them in the schoolyard. The message crosses the borders of language and culture, as

¹ Or "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is famous for saying this but he was actually quoting abolitionist minister Theodore Parker's sermon in 1853.

we welcome those coming to learn English and leaving with a greater sense of connection to their new world. Each act of mission we perform in the name of Jesus invests in a future we do not know yet, but which our faith calls us to invest in with love and care and the hope that we will reach a day that comes closer to God's dreams for the world God has shared with us, a place of God's shalom.

Right after my sermon, we will be hearing from a guest, Edafe Okporo. He is from Nigeria. He had a vision for what his country could become if it could respect the human rights and dignity of LGBTQ people, and if it had more compassion for people living with HIV or AIDS. He was an activist, at great risk to his life. However, he faced dangerous persecution for the ways he used his voice. So, he came to the US to seek safety. However, in this country he left behind one kind of persecution only to find another; he ended up in a detention center in Elizabeth, NJ, where he was captive for 173 days until he was granted asylum, safe to live freely in this country. He will share more of his story after worship. But I am convinced that the ways we welcome-- or do not welcome-- people like Edafe will shape the moral and social fabric of our country. How we embrace the most vulnerable today will impact our future tomorrow.

Investing in God's future is not the same as reacting to a need when it pops up. Hopefully by now you have received an invitation to take part in our church's building campaign to renovate the kitchen and bathrooms. We are not simply patching the ceiling that is caving in the women's room. We are not just patching the hole in the wall next to the oven, or clearing the birds' nests out of the ventilation hood over the stove. What our church has planned embraces the future more than that. These repairs stake a claim in our church's future at the center of the community to preach the gospel, inviting people in to be fed and forgiven, helped and healed, taught, and transformed. We do not yet know who exactly our guests will be. But if we end up entertaining angels without knowing it, we want to be ready.

The state of our kitchen and bathrooms might serve as a metaphor for the state of our country and world. It would be easy to react to the next crisis, whether a law that gets passed that hurts the poor, or yet another immigration regulation that further depletes this country's ability to provide hospitality, or the approval of a high ranking official who will shape laws about women's bodies, who may have a history of assaulting women's bodies. But here's the thing: just like our kitchen and bathroom in their current state will always have new things falling apart, our society in human hands will always have another crisis dominating our headlines. If we are only reactive to the crises as they come, we become exhausted and stop caring. Our bottom line of what is acceptable becomes lower: *If only* I weren't freezing in the kitchen during the winter... *If only* the bathroom stalls could lock when I use them... *If only* our nation's leaders did not insult women... *If only* there were better mental health care so the people I care about could get the resources they need to survive... Since when does our faith call us to be *if only* people?

What following Jesus demands is nothing less than the kingdom of God brought down here on earth. Have hope in *that* vision, and we can rise above the crises in our midst because we know what God promises is so much better than surviving the next latest crisis.² It does not mean that we do not respond when problems arise, because they will. But instead of each crisis consuming us, we are sustained by a bigger picture that energizes our hopes and feeds our futures.

God left Jesus' body and God left the church in human hands. But God did not abandon Jesus, and God did not abandon the church. Instead, God who entered the pain and death of the cross-- and transformed it into resurrection-- enters into our human hands and makes them once again holy members of Christ's body. These hands can indeed build something

² I wrote this paragraph after being inspired by an excellent article by Michelle Alexander, "We Are Not the Resistance" in *The New York Times* Sept. 21, 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/sunday/resistance-kavanaugh-trump-protest.html>

holy, but they cannot do it without God's blessing. May we now open our hands to receive such blessing, today and onward as we welcome our church's future. Amen.