

Summerland United Church
July 13 Stepping Out: Step by Step

Threshold and Christ Candle

Today we pair the story of the lawyer and Jesus in Luke with the introduction from the letter to the Colossians. When the lawyer asks Jesus, what must one do to obtain eternal life, Jesus makes the lawyer answer his own question and we hear: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."*

This is the Good News, the writer of the letter to Colossae encourages the believers to follow and to live into with faith, love and hope. By doing so, *you attain the full knowledge of God's will, in perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding. Then, you'll lead a life worthy and pleasing to our God in every way.*

However, we know that loving your neighbour as yourself is often easier said than done. How does loving God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength and all our minds help us love our neighbours and move our ministry step by step outside the walls and into the world?

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:1-14 and Luke 10:25-27

Whether you take what is written in the bible as fact, myth, metaphor or story, listen for the meaning it has for you on this day.

Colossians 1:1-14

From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Timothy, To the holy and faithful sisters and brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace and peace to you from our Loving God.

We always give thanks to the Abba God of our Savior Jesus Christ whenever we pray for you, ever since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you show toward all the holy ones, because of the hope stored up for you in heaven. It is only recently that you heard of this, when it was announced in the message of the truth.

The Good News which has reached you is spreading all over the world; it is producing the same fruit there as it did among you, ever since you heard about God's grace and understood what it really is. Epaphras, who taught you, is one of our closest coworkers and a faithful laborer of Christ on our behalf, and it was he who told us all about your love in the Spirit.

Therefore, since the day we heard about you, we've been praying for you unceasingly and asking that you attain the full knowledge of God's will, in perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding. Then, you'll lead a life worthy and pleasing to our God in every way.

You' ll multiply good works of every sort and grow in the knowledge of God. And by the might of God' s glory you' ll be endowed with the strength needed to stand fast and endure joyfully whatever may happen.

Thanks be to God for having made you worthy to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light! God rescued us from the authority of darkness and brought us into the reign of Jesus, God' s Only Begotten. And it is through Jesus that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 10: 25-28

²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Reader: May God bless our understanding of these sacred words.

All: Thanks be to God.

Reflection

This morning, I want to start by talking about our Sunday welcome. It is a welcome that I adapted from my former congregation of Mt. Seymour United Church in North Vancouver. Like here, at Mt. Seymour they say this welcome every week. Like here, occasionally someone asks – why do we need to say it every week? *We know!*

The answer has been and always will be- yes, of course we know this! And some weeks we have guests, some weeks we have visitors, some people are away for a time and then come back and some people struggle so hard to believe themselves to be welcome we need to speak it authentically and often so it can both sink in and for them to know it is absolutely true.

Churches have a pretty good track record of saying 'all are welcome' but with caveats. There are churches insist all are welcome, and then in the next breath will say something like we love the sinner and hate the sin. This makes it very hard for people who've been labelled sinners by the church to feel truly and unequivocally welcome for who they are.

St. Jude's Anglican in Hawaii has a welcome they call BE AWARE! And it says –

Here we practice the inclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that you may be gathering with tax collectors, thieves, adulterers, hypocrites, women as well as men, female and male priests, Gay and Lesbians, differently abled, the dying, Native Americans, Mexicans, Asians, Blacks and other ethnic minorities;

Bishops, bigots, heretics, agnostics, atheists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and strangers from foreign lands – anyone like those with whom Jesus met. So be aware this is not an exclusive club. We welcome you all.
(adapted from Kenneth Leech, St. Botolph's, Aldgate, London)

Pretty Radical Hospitality huh? And if there was any wondering on what was meant by – love your neighbour as yourself, or who your neighbour is – this about covers it I think.

The story of the Good Samaritan follows this conversation in Luke where the lawyer asks about receiving eternal life. We didn't read it today because it's a story I think most of us know well. When I spoke about it earlier in the year, I asked us to imagine that we were the Samaritan walking along the road and that we imagine the person beaten and left for dead was Donald Trump (or Kamala Harris, if you're a Trump supporter).

Suddenly, being the good Samaritan, and following the word of God and Jesus becomes really hard. When I shared the St. Jude welcome with minister colleague they commented – do you really want bigots in your church?

Want or not, bigots, hypocrites, megalomaniacs, racists, gay and transphobic people are our neighbours and we're called to love them.

Now let's be perfectly clear. Absolutely perfectly clear – God's Love does not in anyway excuse their behavior, condone their actions or remove the need for them to be held responsible for their actions. In fact – holding them responsible, calling out the hate and creating a world where they can't harm others – is the most loving thing possible.

And. AND let me be clear – I cannot achieve this sort of love. It's a work in progress and will always be. Because how on earth are we supposed to love the people who bring so much harm to the world?

The letter to the Colossians does help us with this, a little bit. Colossians says: *The Good News which has reached you is spreading all over the world; it is producing the same fruit there as it did among you, ever since you heard about God's grace and understood what it really is.*

God's Grace. We've heard about God's Grace – we know from our scripture that all people are made in the image of God. All people contain the beloved spirit of God. God forgives all mistakes, all transgressions, all sins. This we can understand.

However, we are not God. Rather we are follower of Jesus, Son of God, who teaches up to love God *with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.*

And when we do this – when we love God in this way and understand that all people are made in the image of God, then we can start to practice seeing God in all people, any

maybe, just maybe find a little bit of love for them. And if you can't, that's ok- it's really really hard.

So here's what we can do instead. This week some of us will gather to discuss Bishop Mariann Budde's book – How We Learn to Be Brave. And I think about her sermon at the inaugural prayer service back in January. A sermon where she spoke about having mercy. Mercy for the 2sLGBTQIA+ community and the undocumented community. She referred to them as good neighbours – people who contribute to society in positive ways. She called on the powers to be to love their neighbours as themselves.

These words fell on deaf ears. Ears that contain so much hate, for others and for themselves, they cannot find either love or mercy in their hearts. People who call themselves Christians support the actions of the US government – and this is where we need to be brave. In fact , just last week, a pastor in church in Indiana encouraged prayers for members of the queer community to be executed by the government – because the bible says so.

Like Bishop Budde we need to make sure that our Christian voices continue to speak of love, mercy, compassion and hope. And we need to take steps to spread our voice beyond our walls. Just how we do that is a work in progress. But we can and will do it – step by step. Baby steps to get us started so eventually we can take great strides in showing the world that loving God, praising God – means loving our neighbours, all of our neighbours. A love practice that we'll just have to take step-by-step as well.

As we continue to discern our future ministries in Summerland, both within and beyond our walls, I want to share a paragraph from "How we learn to be brave"

A vision of what could be is what inspires us to start on a journey. Sometimes we move decisively toward a goal; other times we begin only with a subtle movement. In either case, the road is long and there are no shortcuts. We begin by taking the first step, and every step that follows. Along the way we are changed, the goal itself may change, or perhaps it may not even be realized. But in deciding to start, we put ourselves on the path of our transformation. The vision may be audacious, but along with it come a sense of excitement and purpose. In the inevitable moments of disappointment and failure, we learn to be brave and to not give up. (pg 69)

May it be so