

"A LOVE THAT WORKS"

A Sermon By

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WHO WAS IT WHO SAID:

"A LOVE THAT WORKS"

"And nobody is sicker than the person who is sick on a day off"....

INTRODUCTION

According to Greek mythology Sisyphus was the King of Corinth. When he died, he was eternally condemned to push a giant boulder to the top of a very steep hill. The closer he got to the top, the steeper that hill became and the harder it was for him to push the boulder. Every time he almost reached the top of the hill, he would lose control of the boulder and it would roll over him and back down to the bottom of the hill where he would have to start all over again.

On this Labor Day weekend, I do hope that none of you are feeling like Sisyphus. I hope you don't wake up each morning feeling like you have to push a giant boulder up a hill, but unfortunately there are many people who do feel that way when it comes to your work. I hope you're not one of them.

Recently a school teacher was complaining about her job. She told about her principal who was lecturing the faculty unmercifully. One by one, he presented them with a painful list of all of their failures, flaws, mistakes, and shortcomings. He lectured them for over an hour and he concluded his lecture by announcing that the Science Club would sponsor a Blood Drive in early October and that he would donate the first pint of blood. An anxious voice from the rear of the room piped up, asking, "Whose blood?" I do hope your work environment is a little better than that and that your boss is a bit more sympathetic.

ANOTHER SIDE

But there's another side to the workplace...the employer's side. According to a story in USA Today, excuses for being absent or late to work are becoming more and more creative.

Accountemps, a temporary help firm, polled executives about the most bizarre excuses they have come across. Some of their winners were:

"My favorite actress just got married, and I needed time alone". "I had to sort my socks". "The wind was blowing against me". "A plane landed on the highways". "There was a bear on my street". And...opting for honesty, one employee wrote, "I just forgot to come in to work!"

Now work certainly is an important part of our lives. It takes a great part of our time and of our energy. Someone has said that things are so hectic now-a-days that we are no longer human beings, but "human doings". I was brought up in a home where it was often said to us, "works a blessing". I agree. It is.

From our study of the scriptures, we know that Jesus worked hard...in his father's carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Indeed work followed Him everywhere He went after leaving Nazareth. He cherished the opportunity to get away every now and then for a little rest and spiritual nourishment just like we do. In today's scripture lesson it's evident that this is what He was looking for: a time for personal retreat...for prayer...a time away from the crowds who were following Him....a place where He thought He would not be recognized. Mark writes,

"He entered a house and did not want anyone to know  
He was there....." (Mark 7: 24)

PAIN IS UNIVERSAL

But the plans of Jesus for a bit of a breather were interrupted almost at once. News of His presence got out and a woman came to see Him who needed His help. And this brings us to the first thing we need to say this morning and it is that pain is universal. If Jesus felt that by His going into an unfamiliar territory He could somehow insulate Himself from people in distress, He was wrong. People with problems and people with pains are everywhere.

Some years ago there was a Bishop of our United Methodist Church by the name of Cavanaugh. In one of his pastorates he met a physician who was a bit of a skeptic. Their work brought them together quite often and soon they became good friends. One day as Cavanaugh was walking down the street, the physician pulled his buggy up to the curb next to Cavanaugh and invited him for a ride. He accepted and together they talked about the weather and then went on to another subject. The doctor asked the minister a rather pointed question.

"Preacher...you and I are good friends, but you puzzle me a bit. How can a man of your intellectual ability spend his life telling his 'old wives' tales' of God's love and the resurrection of Jesus?"

Cavanaugh thought for a moment or two and then quietly said,

"Suppose in your younger days you had a cancer and a man came to you who claimed that he had a prescription that had cured many cancers and he wanted you to try it. Suppose you had accepted it and had cured you. What would people think of you if you would not take that same prescription to every patient of yours who had cancer?"

At once the doctor said, "Why...they'd think I was a fool". And the Bishop looked at him seriously and said,

"Twenty-five years ago I had a cancer...not a physical cancer....I suppose you would call it a moral cancer. The Great Physician gave me a prescription for my illness that cured me. So what would you think of me if I didn't take that prescription to every single person that I could possibly reach who needed it....every single person who has some great heartache or some sin that needs healing."

After a thoughtful silence of several minutes, the doctor answered, "I'd guess I would have to say that you were a fool."

It wasn't long afterwards that the doctor accepted Christ into his life. And soon after that the two friends teamed up and helped heal many souls in this world. Pain is universal. There is a world of need all around us. There's no place on the face of this earth that is so privileged that there are not people there who need what Christ alone can provide. Hope. Healing. Peace. Pain is universal. That's the first thought that grows out of this story in Mark's Gospel account. But let's move on to a second thought.

AND SO, TOO, IS GOD'S LOVE

And, so, too is God's love. The love of God is universal.

The woman who wanted to meet Jesus that day had everything going against her. To begin with, she was what was called a "Syrophenician" which was a racial term suggesting that she was not accepted by either the Gentiles or the Jews. And furthermore, the simple fact that she was a woman meant that she had no legal rights. And to add to all of this, she had a daughter who was infected with what Mark calls an unclean spirit. These were the strikes against her.

There was one trait, however, that she had that was in her favor. She was a person of faith. She saw God's power at work in Jesus, and so she asked Him to help her daughter. But Jesus answered her in a rather shocking way, saying:

"You must let the children have all they want first. It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."  
(Mark 7: 27)

This disturbing statement by Jesus reflected Jewish sentiment in that day toward "outsiders". They were "as dogs". But this woman was persistent as well as wise. She said,

"Yes, Lord...I know....but even the dogs under the table eat what the children leave."

That must have been a satisfying answer to Jesus because He then said,

"For saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter".  
(Mark 7: 29)

And the woman returned to her home and discovered that her daughter was well. She was cured.

A young student came to his rabbi and asked,

"Rabbi....how can we tell exactly the moment when night has ended and the day has begun? Is it when it is so light that we can no longer distinguish a star in the morning sky?"

"No, my son...this is not how we tell" answered the wise rabbi. "This is not how we tell that night has ended and the day has begun". "How then can we tell?" asked the student. The rabbi answered, "We know that night has ended and the day has begun when we look into the face of the stranger next to us and recognize that stranger to be our brother or our sister. Until that moment we have spent our lives in the darkness, but at that moment, we have awakened into the light of day."

Jesus looked into the eyes of this Syrophenician woman. He saw a sister in distress and He responded. He showed her the universal love of God. It is still there, even today...for all of us.

In a story by D. H. Lawrence, "The Man Who Loved Islands", a man hates people so much that he takes all his savings and buys an uninhabited island. He thinks he will be happy there, away from every other human being, but he is wrong. He becomes restless. He blames it on the island. Maybe on a different island things will be different so he sells his island, moves to another, then

still another, and still another. For years he moves from island to island trying to find happiness in solitude. In the end he becomes hopelessly insane.

One of the hardest lessons we learn is that the Gospel is about loving people. All people. Everywhere. God's love is universal. And when we reach out to others who are in pain, we are doing the work of God.

A couple by the name of Hope and George experienced great pain when their daughter was killed riding the subway. Instead of letting the pain dominate their lives, they decided that they would help others who have experienced a similar tragedy in their lives. They now spend much of their time writing letters to other parents who have also experienced the death of one of their children. They write their messages of hope and encouragement from the unique experience of someone who had been in their shoes, even though they both know that no one can truly know the pain of another. They share a genuine concern to help people who are hurting and people often respond to their concern, sometimes writing a letter of gratitude in return.

Yes, pain is universal. But through people like Hope and George, God's love is made manifest. And this brings us to the final point of today's message.

HIS LOVE IS AVAILABLE TO ALL

God's love is available to all of us. If it is true that God's love is universal, then it also means that it is available to you and to me....whoever we may be, whatever our background, wherever we may come from and regardless of what we may have done. Perhaps there is some one person present today who needs to hear this.

Let me tell you about a man whose name is John. John traces his problems with alcohol to an earthquake that devastated his hometown when he was eight years old. He remembers to this day sleeping in the back yard because his family was afraid to go back into their house. He remembered hearing full-grown men and women screaming as their town continued to shake throughout the night and into the next day. That was when John first realized that there were some things that were beyond anyone's control. It was that lost sense of security that led John to his first drink years later while he was serving Uncle Sam in the Navy. He found that it made him feel secure again, for the first time in many a year. He continued to drink in order to maintain his sense of security and before long he was walking the path of becoming an alcoholic.

One night some years later, while drinking himself into a stupor, he began to think of what had become of his life. He looked at himself and decided he didn't like what he was, with the drinking controlling his sense of well-being. He decided to make a change. He left his drink half-finished on the counter and the next day he found out where there was an AA meeting and he went to it. Today, John is a respected, contributing pillar of the community and he is quick to give all the credit for his recovery to God. He knows that it is God who has taken care of him and that God will continue to do so.

Recalling his former life, John says this:

"If people could go back and see the way I was drinking, and then see how much my life has changed, I don't care what their life was like, they'd have to know that it was possible for them to change, too."

John discovered, even through his pain, that the love of God was there, and it is still there and available to him and to all. We need to hear this and to fully take it in from time to time.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH

Friends, on this Labor Day weekend, let us remind ourselves that Jesus is still working. And that He never takes a vacation as long as there are people who need Him. He is looking for people who are hurting, for people who are lonely, people who are troubled and bound by addictions of every kind. He tells them: "Come to Me...all ye who labor; and are heavy laden. I can help you....yes, even today!"

Three thoughts to reflect upon as we share in the Sacrament of Communion. Pain is universal. But so is the love of God. And that love is available to you and to me.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your spirit...to Your nearness in these quiet moments, O God. Wrestle with each of us in the hidden and shadowy corners of our hearts where pain and hurt, loneliness and anxiety may be lurking.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care and encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Point out markers on the trail for those who may have lost their way and who may be present here this hour.

Douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision. For the race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would run it well, and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

And touch with Your healing those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

Pearl Keller  
Coralie Bailey  
Shelly Roper  
Daisy Herrick  
Eric de Freitas