

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
May 19, 2019 – 5th Sunday of Easter
Title: Marked – By A Loving God
Scripture: Acts 11:1-18
John 13:31-35

I want to show you a picture. It might be hard for you to see it very well but can someone tell me what it is? Yes, it is a picture of two hands making a heart. What you probably cannot see is that it is made up of other small pictures. There are more than 3,000 tiny pictures of people that all come together to make this bigger picture.

The technique is called “photo mosaic” and it can make for some interesting pictures. Each tiny square contains a picture that is complete by itself and you could look at each one individually and appreciate it for what it is. But when you step back and look at it in its entirety, you see a very different picture.

One of the commentators I read this week used this image to think about scripture – many small individual pictures making up a great big picture.ⁱ In today’s scriptures we see a couple of those pictures and how they become part of the whole complete picture.

Our Gospel reading is the beginning of a collection of passages known as the Farewell Discourses.ⁱⁱ It begins here on the night that Jesus is betrayed. The first words of today’s reading, “When he had gone out” refer to Judas leaving to go to betray Jesus. The Farewell discourse continues for three more chapters and then another chapter after that of Jesus praying for his disciples.

During these chapters, Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for a life without his physical presence. I have always thought it strange that we

read these words just a few weeks after Easter, but I have recently come to think that this is a really good time to read them. Jesus was preparing his disciples to live without his physical presence – and for us, that is really what our whole faith is about, isn't it? We have never known Jesus' physical presence with us, so we, like the disciples, need to understand what it is to follow Jesus, without being able to physically see or touch him.

With his death coming soon, Jesus doesn't try to comfort the disciples. Instead, he tries to orient them toward their mission, toward what they will need to think about when he is no longer physically with them.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus gives them a new commandment that they are to love one another. This is not really a "new" commandment, in that it is not original with Jesus. It is one of the foundational commandments or laws in Judaism. It also says that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

What is new, is Jesus telling them, and us, what that looks like. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This love is so basic that Jesus says it is the way that people will know that we are his disciples, his followers. We are marked by a loving God with the identity of those who love as Jesus loves us.

This was so important that on the last night that Jesus would spend with his disciples, he emphasized to them the importance of loving each other as he has loved them. This is one of the many small but very important pictures that make up the larger picture of what it means to be a Christian.

It was important for the disciples to hear this commandment at this time. It was important for them to be reminded of the mission to which

Jesus had called them and that they should continue after his death, after his resurrection, after the time when he would no longer physically be present with them. It is an important piece for us to hear, to know, as part of being followers of Jesus.

It was a tough time for the disciples. Their lives were about to change in ways they could not understand and Jesus' message to them was critically important.

For Peter this would be one of the big pieces of his response and his life. Today's reading from the book of Acts is the culmination of several of those individual pictures, individual pieces of God's plan that Peter came to understand. Peter heard Jesus tell him that he was to love others. After Jesus' had left them, Peter had a disturbing dream; one that challenged his understanding of what was holy and what was not. Later, the Holy Spirit nudged him to follow three unknown men who showed up at his door unannounced.

The small pieces of the larger picture kept coming. Peter met a devout Gentile, Cornelius, who had also been getting some pieces of the puzzle, of God's great plan. Peter remembered the experience of Pentecost when he and the other disciples were touched by the Holy Spirit and were able to speak in languages that they didn't know and to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection with Jews from all around the world. Peter remembered Jesus' words to him and to the other disciples. And then he found himself in the home of a Gentile.

"Little by little, one piece after another" it all came together, "until it was clear: even the Gentiles have received the repentance that leads to life!"^{iv} In today's reading, Peter was being questioned by the believers in Jerusalem who wanted to know why he had gone to Gentiles. Peter

explained his experience to help them understand. He explained how the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles and asked, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

When they heard this, at first they had nothing to say, and then they praised God and rejoiced that God had opened doors for the Gentiles that they had previously thought were closed to them. Their entire perspective was changed. They had a sudden new understanding.

This week I read, “That’s often the way it is with us too. We receive a piece of the bigger picture God is doing. It’s a piece to meditate on in its own right, but it’s often just a fragment of the bigger picture. We have a piece that must be combined with others to reflect the bigger picture of God’s work in the world.”^v

Rev. Adrienne Stricker reflecting upon this and what it means for us today says, “The community is still at a vulnerable state in its life together. If the community doesn’t learn to inhabit a love that will thrive despite its differences, the message of God in the broader community will be affected.”^{vi}

We only have to look around us to see the many ways that the Christian community is separated by our differences rather than inhabiting a love that helps us thrive as a community of love. It is abundantly clear that the message of God in the broader community is indeed affected.

Several recent events have made this increasingly obvious to me. On the last day of Passover last month, a young man opened fire in a synagogue in Poway, California killing one person and injuring others. We’ve heard of this happening before, however, in this situation, the shooter had written a seven-page letter spelling out his core beliefs that

Jewish people deserved to die and that his intention to kill Jews would glorify God. In the manifesto, he not only verbally attacked Jews and racial minorities but also presented a cogent Christian theology that he believed explained and justified his beliefs and actions.

We have to ask ourselves how someone who doesn't know much about Christianity would read and hear those words and what they would believe about Christians. How is God's message to the world being affected by words and actions like this?

Earlier this month, the mayor of Hoschton, Georgia told a city council member that she had yanked the resume of a talented, competent black applicant from a group of 4 finalists for the position of city administrator because "he is black, and the city isn't ready for this." One of the City Councilmen defended this decision saying, "I'm a Christian and my Christian beliefs are you don't do interracial marriage. That's the way I was brought up and that's the way I believe." He added, "I have black friends, I hired black people. But when it comes to all this stuff you see on TV, when you see blacks and whites together, it makes my blood boil because that just not the way a Christian is supposed to live."^{vii}

I try very hard not to judge another person's beliefs; but I am finding it increasingly difficult when I hear Christianity being used to justify actions like these. When I find myself talking to someone who says that they don't believe in God, I ask them about the God they don't believe in, because the likelihood is that I don't believe in that god either. Especially if the god they don't believe in is a god who treats one group of people as less important, less valued, less loved than another.

Closer to home, our denomination is locked in disagreement about the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in The United Methodist Church,

specifically as it relates to ordination and marriage. A plan was passed in February that if it becomes fully enacted in the next year will be very restrictive and exclusive. This week and next, two groups of people from all of the Annual Conferences in the United States are meeting to discuss next steps and how to respond. This will, undoubtedly, be a subject of great discussion at our session of Annual Conference in June. Those of us who believe that our Christian faith calls for full inclusion find ourselves in deep disagreement with those who also believe that their faith demands a different response.

This past week, the news has been full of legislators and others debating whether the law or women should control what happens to our bodies and many of the arguments have included references to Christian beliefs.

When people proclaim with absolute certainty that their Christian faith not only allows but justifies and promotes some of these beliefs and actions, I want to run in the opposite direction. I have often just kept my mouth shut, wanting to avoid conflict. As a pastor I have tried not to share my own opinion or understanding from the pulpit, but rather to encourage all of us to spend time in prayer and study to better know what it is we believe and, perhaps more importantly, why we believe it. However, I'm also realizing that when loud voices are using Jesus as a reason to harm others, I cannot stand by silently.

Remember the young man who killed people in the synagogue and explained in clear language why his faith said that was the right thing to do. After reading what he wrote, the pastor of the church that he attended, and where his father was an Elder, spoke to the congregation and reminded them that while they were shocked that he would do that, he had learned

that theology right there in that congregation. He challenged himself and them to explore what they believed and to become much more aware of the ramifications of what they professed, of the consequences of their beliefs when carried out.

It is important for all of us to examine our faith, to understand what we believe and why. It is important for us to realize that people of faith do not come to the same decisions and understandings, but it is also important for us to be very aware that what we are teaching others is sound doctrine, and truly in line with God's will and God's teaching.

I try to remind myself that I am also an imperfect person and while I am confident that my Christian faith calls me to be fully inclusive and to love all of the people God created, I have to hold before myself, not only the possibility, but also the reality, that there are ways and places where my understanding is not complete. Preaching, teaching, and living out our faith is something to take very seriously, remembering that we are not God, but that our words and actions influence the world's understanding of God's message.

Just like a photo mosaic, all the individual pieces of our faith come together to form a much larger picture of what it means to each of us to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, followed a multi-faceted approach to understand our faith and to help us discern God's will. He believed that as we are trying to understand and interpret Scripture, it is important to include tradition, experience, and reason in our discernment and understanding. The Bible witnesses to a variety of diverse traditions and some of them caused tension in interpretation in the early days of our heritage. The Bible, as a whole, "expresses the fundamental unity of God's

revelation as received and experienced by people in the diversity of their own lives.”^{viii}

I do believe that Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reading are absolutely basic to our faith. I believe that we are marked by Christ, marked by a loving God, to be witnesses to God’s love. I believe that Jesus’ words to his disciples on that last night, are his words to us today, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We live in a world where many do not see or experience love as being a basic and essential part of the Christian faith. I pray that in small and large ways our daily witness will help bring others to know that Christians are people who love profoundly, deeply, inclusively, and unconditionally. I pray that each day we will learn to love others more like Jesus loves us. I pray that those who meet us “will know that we are Christians by our love.”

ⁱ Hoezee, Scott editor. The Abigndon Preaching Annual 2019. Material for May 19, 2019, p.57-8.

ⁱⁱ Stricker, Adrienne. www.gbod.org/worship Material for Easter Season, “Marked by a Loving God.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Hoezee,

^v Ibid

^{vi} Stricker

^{vii} <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2019/05/georgia-city-councilman-interracial-marriage-is-not-how-christians-should-live/>

^{viii} Book of Discipline, 2016, para 105, p.85