

Paying Attention to Where We Stand

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Now, before I even really get into the sermon...I want to share that a Sunday like this one that a preacher in some ways hopes for but also is absolutely terrified about....Hopeful in the sense of that it is Sunday's like this that we need hear the gospel...hear the good news more than ever...

But at the same time fear because there is so much tension in the room...so much loss experienced....so much pain... and the last thing that we want to do is unintentionally say something that hurts people even more....

So this morning I want to start out by asking for your grace....grace and understanding that words sometimes can't heal the wounds completely.... Grace in regard to my own limitations because while I can do my best to empathize, I will never be able to fully experience the reaction that those you who are women or immigrants, or people of color or members of the LGBT community may be feeling after Tuesday's election...

But it is my prayer that at the end of this service...at the end of this time together, even if we don't have all of the right words....or even know where exactly to go next, that we experienced the presence of God's spirit among us...and that we have seen the reflection of God in one another's faces.

Today, Ron and I are beginning a mini-sermon series, Just 2-weeks long where we will be thinking about diversity...and the role it should play in our lives.

This is of course a topic we have addressed before. However, we believe it is one that is worth continued study---especially considering the current state of our nation.

Last Sunday, we took the opportunity to pray for our country during the election. We said the same prayer as our brothers and sisters at Hyde Park UMC in Florida...a prayer that went from sea to shining sea.

And now this morning, in the wake of Tuesday's election we gather once again.

We gather as diverse group. No doubt our votes for everything from President of the United States to the various California Propositions spread across the board.

Just like the opinions in this sanctuary are split, so is our country. We have blue states and red states....however, I have to believe it is less clear cut than this. Because we are not totally blue people...or totally red people....there are times when we don't vote along party lines...there are times we don't vote for a party at all.... Yet, it is so easy for us to allow the media, the press, whoever...to make it seem like it is always us against them....that you either have to be completely on one side or the other.....

But we know that It's not that simple....or at least that it shouldn't be.

Because the only way it will ever be that simple...the only way those lines are going to remain that clearly divided is if we stop taking the time to listen to and engage someone who has different opinions than we do.

In addition to listening to one another and to those of who are vulnerable...this morning I want to assert that now, more than ever it is important to recognize where we stand and who we stand with. Because whether we realize it or not....even when we aren't saying anything at all, the position in which we stand....our social location can speak volumes...because the gates that we sit behind instead of getting involved where justice is desperately needed speaks volumes to the world.

Our first scripture passage this morning, reminds us of the story of Moses encountering God in the burning Bush. And in this story we find God instructing Moses to take off his sandals because he is standing on Holy Ground.

In his teaching series entitle "Nooma," Christian Author Rob Bell offers us this thought on the story: *"Now, Moses has been walking this land for 40 years...it isn't as if the ground all of a sudden became holy. The ground didn't just change. It's that Moses becomes aware of it; which raises the question for us: "Are we standing on holy ground all the time?" Passing burning bushes on the left and the right, and because we're moving too fast and we're too distracted, we miss them."*

I love that last line of Bell's statement so much that I have to repeat it again: *Are we....Passing burning bushes on the left and the right, and because we're moving too fast and we're too distracted, we miss them."*

Just because your candidate did or didn't win or because the proposition you wanted did or did not pass....whether you are celebrating the outcomes of last Tuesday or lamenting them....God is not done talking.

There is still work to do. There are still folks who need our help. Who need our love....who need us to show them the hope that we find in our God.

And sometimes the most powerful way we can show them that love and offer them the encouragement they need to stand beside them and remind them that the ground in which we stand together is holy....is filled with the presence of the divine.

While no one knows who actually said it, the theologian Karl Barth has this piece of wisdom attributed to him: "We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Or maybe in today's world it would be have the Bible App opened right beside the CNN app while watching the news on your iPad.

But as I was reflecting on the story of the burning bush, I couldn't help but see it in part relating to those who are protesting the Dakota access pipeline at the Standing Rock Native American Reservation.

Now while I'm sure there are various angles to look at this action politically, the root cause of what the protestors are asking for is the protection of their sacred land and sole water source for the reservation.

While developers and corporation in their motivation to fulfil their objectives looked at a map and for the path of least resistance for their pipeline, they overlooked that the ground was holy.

The overlooked that there are people who walk that land...the land of their ancestors and hear the voice of the divine.

An interesting event took place on Facebook a week or two ago...some of you who are on the social media site may have noticed.

But hundreds of thousands of people were checking into Standing Rock...they were setting that as their location even if they weren't physically there.

They were doing a simple act to let the world know that they see that site as holy ground and will symbolically stand with the native people and their allies there.

And this action got results. It helped to draw America's attention to what was going on...and made our leaders have to take a stand on the situation.

(Slide # 5 SSP Trip Photo of Boarder Wall)

A couple months ago I shared with you the experience that a group of 25 youth and 5 chaperones from our church experienced on our Mission trip to San Diego through the Sierra Service project.

And in addition to the work we did on help low income families and organizations in the community, we were also able allow the youth and chaperones to experience the boarder wall that divides the United States from Mexico at a place called Friendship Park.

This area is called Friendship Park because it is one of the few places that family members and friends can meet on each side of the fence and speak to one another or even touch a finger through the wall.

And the amazing thing was that half of our group got to stand on the Mexico side of the wall and the other half on the US side...and we were able to connect in one big circle as if the wall wasn't there at all.

Now earlier that week we had heard stories about individuals who were separated from the families by the wall for various reasons.

One example was a women who while going through child birth in Mexico experienced complications.....so she was flown to UC San Diego medical center where the treatment that could save her life and her child's life could take place....but then that meant that her child was eligible to be a US citizen because she was born on U.S. soil.

So the mother had to decide does she stay undocumented in the US with her legal citizen daughter...and give her daughter a chance at a better life....or go back.

Another example of a young man who was moved to the United States by his family when he was 4 months old. Lived here is entire life...but then when we was 18 and got in trouble for a minor infraction was being threatened to be sent back to Mexico...a place where at this point he had no family there...hadn't ever been there in the last 18 years...and was looking at having to start his life all over in a land that was foreign to him.

And there are endless stories like this.....but it wasn't until we stood on the ground....stood along the fence that affects so many people's lives that got a glimpse of the struggle these people face.....we were able to really see what it looked like to see our loved ones on the other side of that rusted metal.

In some ways Friendship Park is a terrible place....it is a reminder of the separation that exists in our world.

But that is also the same ground in which family members are able to reconnect.

That is the same land where a United Methodist Missionary stands on one side...and Methodist pastor stands on the other side preside over communion every Sunday and offer prayers for the people who are separated from one another.

They are acknowledging that God is even present in our separation.

The ground in which we build our fences and our borders and our walls is still consecrated by God....

We can try to separate it and deface it and ignore it all we want but God will still be present.

God will still try desperately to put a burning bush there if we would only open our eyes and see it....open our ears and hear God's voice.

But hearing and seeing is not all that is required. Once we take the time to open ourselves to God's presence or those places we also have to act on what we are told.

The Bible is filled with God using imperfect people to accomplish God's wills on earth and Moses is no exception.

He is encountering God....seeing the burning bush...hearing God's voice and what does he do....how does he respond? He responds by saying: *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

Who am I....to do this thing....

We love to give Moses a hard time about this but it is the exact same thing that many of us do every day!

Who am I that I should make sure the kids whose parents are undocumented don't have to worry that when they go home from school their parents might not be there?

Who am I to worry about women and young girls feeling like our leaders are setting an example that says women are less than men....?

Who am I to worry about the water in Flint, Michigan or North Dakota?

Who am I to go speak out against the racial slurs begin written on the bathroom stalls of California High School in San Ramon or the confederate flags people are using as symbols of oppression?

As a kid, my favorite super-hero was always Spiderman...and in the narrative, Peter Parker...the boy who would turn into spider man after getting special powers from a radioactive spider-bite heard these last words from his uncle and adoptive father: With great power comes great responsibility.

And that is the motto that Spiderman tries to live by.

It is what he has to remind himself of when we wants to just hang up his disguise and let someone else deal with all the problems and super villains of the world.

And the reality is...that each and every one of us have great power.

In this sanctuary we have people who are highly educated...who have achieved amazing things in business and innovation....we have people in this room who have had meals with governors and presidents.

Even those of us who don't think we have done anything or have anything of great power...just by the fact that you may be in the majority and not the minority means you have power...the power to stand besides those folks on the margins.

And Jesus speaks to this! In our gospel lesson today Jesus says that *"Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!"*

This idea is Biblical...it's in red letters....

We have been given amazing opportunities in life which have gained us influence and power....and God calls us to use it.

Where will we choose to stand....with whom will we stand beside?

Our district superintendent, Staci Current knew that this Sunday was going to be a challenge for the preachers in our Northern California congregations, so last night she sent out an email of encouragement and provided this beautiful piece of advice that she learned from one of her seminary professors, Bishop James Thomas:

Who said: Don't get too bogged down in all of the questions that we might have at a time like this....but instead share what we know for certain....

So to wrap things up...and in hope of not getting too bogged down in all of the questions about where we go from here and what does this election mean.....

Here is what I know for certain:

"That the kingdom of Jesus is neither red nor blue, left nor right, tea nor coffee. As followers of Jesus we follow an alternative party of the kingdom of God" (Mike Slaughter, Hijacked 2012).

I know that God is Love and that Love always wins.

I know that each person in this room has a voice....and has the power and responsibility to stand with those folks who are being left out and oppressed.

I know that our children are watching us....to see if we will take action...to see if we will speak against the evil of the world....keeping in mind that each and every one of us made the pledge to do that at our children's baptism or during our individual membership vows.

I know that God has a word for us if we would just slow down...stay for a little while....take off our shoes and listen.

I know while we don't agree about everything...we do have a mutual respect for one another...a respect that can be used to achieve common goals that can benefit those in need.

And finally...I know that we can trust in Jesus' promise that when leaving the Earth he sent us the Holy Spirit...our advocate...our helper so those things we may think are impossible become possible,

So May we go out...love those who need love....stand with those who need support and recognize that with our great power....comes great responsibility as we pay attention to where we stand.

Amen.