

“A Piece of Good News”

Psalm 25:1-7; I Peter 2:2-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 30, 2014 – 4th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

We live in a time of throwaway people, people who just don't seem to count. Whole groups are dismissed out of hand as unneeded, unwanted, or irrelevant. That's how society seems to deal with troubled teens, the chronically unemployed, the homeless, the infirm elderly, drug addicts, and illegal immigrants. They may be fully human in fact, but their treatment is often far less than this.

I knew a man some years back who was very opinionated and outspoken. He saw the difficulties we face in America in very clear terms. “The problem is with them,” he used to say. “They're the ones at fault.” In his thinking “they” would include Blacks and Mexicans and Arabs, liberals and feminists and gays, Jews and Catholics and atheists, vegetarians and flag burners and college professors, unwed mothers and bums and drunks, Indians and foreigners and Democrats, welfare cheats and gun banners and nudists...and, especially, tax-and-spend politicians of any party.

I'm sure I've forgotten some categories, but you get the idea. Of all the times I heard him sound off, I never remembering him identifying even once with any group in which he might be included. The blame was always with someone else, someone unlike him. This man was quick to spot the differences between people, but never their similarities. He told me, and anyone else who would listen, that he was a person of strong convictions and faith. “I just say it like it is!” he claimed.

Recently I came upon a perceptive quote from Anne Lamott, and I think it fits in this situation. “You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. “ By the way, did you know that Fred Phelps died last week? He led the church that was infamous for demonstrating at military funerals and other in-your-face behavior. I wonder how he's dealing with all the diversity in heaven? Hopefully he's discovered the breadth of God's love that's wide enough even to embrace him.

It's hard to repair the breaches between people when a lot of folks aren't even considered to be deserving of their humanity. As long as some people feel superior to others, the problems we see around us can't really be worked out. Exclusivism breeds intolerance; moral self-righteousness leads to hatred. The stronger and more powerful may be able to hold minorities in check, but nothing lasting can ever be resolved in this manner. It will take something far different to overcome our problems, to surmount both the artificial and real barriers that alienate us from each other.

We get a clue as to what can be the bridge between people in our New Testament text for this morning. Here 1 Peter tells us to come to Christ, who himself knew what it was like to be rejected, and to bind ourselves to him.

This passage causes us to look back to the common building practices in Palestine to get its meaning. Stone construction was quite common because rocks were plentiful in that landscape and because the finished building, if properly done, would be a strong and lasting place.

Like today, the skill of the builder was as important as the materials used. There had to be a plan to guide the construction. The stones had to be chosen with care for their exact placement, then mortared into position. You start out with a huge pile of rocks and, if it's not done just right, it could end up as a pile of rocks once again.

The key element in this kind of construction seems to be in finding the perfect stone in shape and size to serve as the cornerstone for the structure. Everything starts from this point and all the others would

be aligned from this one. The cornerstone determines how the stones will fit together as a whole, and the strength of the house is dependent on that first one.

Peter employs this imagery in our morning text. It echoes the very words that Jesus used to refer to himself when he said, "Have you not read this scripture, 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'" Jesus understood himself to be the fulfillment of God's intention from the beginning of time, and Peter affirms his belief that he, indeed, is the Messiah.

Many rejected him, however. They looked upon him as a troublemaker and a threat to their carefully crafted beliefs. There was no room for him in their faith. They despised him for what he said and the example he gave. They regarded him of no value and so he could be tossed away like so much garbage on a heap.

It appears that Jesus spent much of his time among people who, themselves, felt rejected and of no value. Tax collectors and prostitutes and the ill and handicapped of various sorts were amazed to find that they were not dismissed by this man who taught them about God's love. And what they could not understand of his words, they could feel in his glance. His eyes said to them, "Friends, you have worth to God, for God gave you life and cares for you like a parent loves a child."

Leslie Weatherhead, the British pastor and writer, relates a little story which seems to fit here. He recalled a summer when he stayed a few days with friends. Their dog, Pete, came up to where he was reclining in a lawn chair and sat at his feet. The dog was old and feeble and no longer handsome. He had a serious skin condition and his back was raw with sores. Some suggested that he be put away but the dog actually belonged to Mike, their only son, who was serving in the navy.

Weatherhead then went on: "My hostess explained that Pete was certainly a great care as he tottered about and something of an anxiety. 'But,' she added, her eyes softening, 'we love him also for Mike's sake.' They saw the dog as someone Mike loved. They couldn't have done away with him as a nuisance because the dog was bound up with Mike and Mike with the dog. What could they say to Mike upon his return, that Pete was no longer of use and therefore not worth saving?"

Weatherhead conveys in this simple story that what the world thinks is useless and folly may be that which is most loved by God; and the heart of this truth is that there are no throwaway people. This was central to the message that Jesus brought to those who were looked down upon and despised by those who felt themselves to be superior. They smugly made value judgments toward others and even justified their prejudices invoking God's name. Jesus loved the downtrodden and the discouraged even as he himself was declared expendable by those in power.

Peter tells those early Christians that you, who think of yourselves at the margins of life, that "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. You are God's own people. You have been called out of the darkness into light to proclaim God's wonderful acts. You, like Christ, are to be the light of the world."

I can just imagine his hearers responding, "Who, me? You must be joking. Me, the light of the world?" I'm a nobody. I can't do anything of that magnitude." And Peter answering back, "Yes, you. Because it is God who does the choosing and decides who will serve."

Lest we think this has no application to our own day, consider that these words might be written to us as well. Perhaps we, too, are God's chosen people. Does it seem preposterous? We can deny this possibility or simply laugh it off. We can say that maybe it might have applied to the early church, but surely not to us in our age. It was their calling and not ours.

Well, whosever's calling it is what are the characteristics of a people set aside in this way? First, they are included not because it is their action, but because they have been chosen for that role.

Secondly, this is not to be just any grouping, but one to serve the King of Kings. There are many competing loyalties like work and politics and sports. Many people enlist in those causes. But this one is different. It is the most important of all.

Thirdly, such a special calling serves God's interests and not primarily our own. Those set aside must regularly ask, "Is this what God wants or what we want?" That's not so easy to discern and sometimes good intention strays far away from what it is intended.

Finally, in being called to service we are of one group. We may be organized differently or have some varying beliefs, but we respond to the same call. There is no Protestant call or Catholic call; no Presbyterian call or Methodist call. That's why we must learn to identify together and work together.

Should we think of ourselves as self-sufficient, as not needing other parts of the body, then we miss what it is to be God's people. It does not push others away, but brings all of us together. We are individual stones who are set side by side, aligned with Christ who, himself, is the cornerstone.

Anne Frank wrote in her diary: "Everyone has inside of himself a piece of good news! The good news is that you really don't know how great you can be, how much you can love, what you can accomplish, and what your potential is. How can you top good news like that?"

Friends, that good news for us is that each person is loved and has value. We have been chosen not because of our worthiness, but because that is the Lord's desire. If God treats us as one, then doesn't it make sense that we strive to see each other in the same way?