

Sermon Recap for September 24, 2023

My friends,

Last Sunday we took some time, just as there were counter protests happening on the steps of our Provincial Legislature, to look at what it might take to have some meaningful dialogue about issues where the “right” and “left” seem so polarized.

The key, as laid out in our interpretation of the reading (found below) is to learn from our blind spots as we search to embrace the diversity of God’s creation.

I took some time to name three things:

- 1) The concrete things we can do to improve the quality of our conversations, while not backing away from the central truth of a diverse creation.
- 2) The NEED for God amid the conversation, in the sense that anything conversation that eliminates the sense of the divine (realizing that there is diversity is the experience of the divine) will fall short of the mark.
- 3) A look at who we are at Augustine and the imperative to cultivate such conversation here in Winnipeg.

So here, in a nutshell, is what I shared.

Points to improve the conversation:

Here's a recipe for respectful and meaningful dialogue that has consequence. (With acknowledgement to Tara Henley and Katie Herzog - Google them. Listen to the interview. It's worth your while.)

👉 Use humour. (Personally - I favor the self depreciating kind. Ask any Newfoundlander about the wisdom in this. They know best.)

👉 Reduce the hyperbolic language. Speak in precise terms about what you know - not what you think you know. All opinions are born of bias. Not all opinions are valid.

👉 So, then, name your bias openly.

👉 When that happens - and not until that happens - start a thorough analysis from all facets of the objective situation. (Which is different than making room for everyone's opinion.)

The NEED for God

I mentioned that these points in of themselves fall short because they eliminate the need for God. Admittedly, this is my bias. My contention is that without God, there is no crystalizing moment where people let go of their prejudice. There does in fact need to be a “be still and know that I am God moment” where we literally step out of own way to overcome our sense of

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separation. What we once thought was wise becomes foolish because Godly wisdom takes over. I told the story of a young man who came to me facing all kinds of challenges – stemming mostly because he could not read. And this, despite all the “expertise” that had tried to help him in school. It was in confirmation classes, something that he himself had asked for, that something broke loose. Because he could not read, he came to me with his questions, and I would read the bible back to him so that he could ponder the answers that God had placed on his heart.

Within a few short years, not only could he read, but he became a carpenter, a father and devoted husband. No accident I would say that his mother-in-law, is a lay worship leader in the United Church.

Finally – at Augustine, please know that as your minister, I remain committed to social justice and bridge building. We have a group of people who will devote their time to communicating with the community at large about the principles of peace and grace. And not just a reaction to the “other side” but in service of the Kingdom of God – where the first shall be last and the last shall be first – and none shall be afraid. (From the Hymn “Hope is a Star”)

Please enjoy the following interpretation of our scripture passage for the service:

Be blessed. Be a blessing.

(Rev) Eric

Before we take some time to put today’s reading into context, it might be helpful to recap where we have been for the past month. Think of this as little trailer that you would see on a serial television program and hear that voice of the narrator saying, “Previously on Augustine” Back in August, we asked the question – When you speak about Augustine, who do we say that we are? And this question rested on the biblical interpretation that in Matthew’s Gospel, part of Jesus’ identity is tied to a part of the world that stood for an acceptance that diversity is inherent in the creative LOGOS of God. And that this identity stood in opposition to an established hierarchy of things that characterized the Greek world.

From there, we took the step to celebrate Communion where Rev Eric and Linda Ann Sturgeon collaborated on the service. The underlying message was that collaboration is not simply a bright idea. It is in fact a call from God extended to us by Jesus.

A week later, we heard the testimony from Jeff Carter and the genesis of Augustine Centre. This is where we heard Jesus’ teaching about being present where two or three are gathered in his name. Rev Eric added the following: While the letter of the law is important because human beings need structure, the law will only work if it is lived amid relationships of truth and compassion. This teaching about human agency guided by Godly wisdom is a gift to the world when it is introduced.

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Finally, last week, amid the teaching on forgiveness, we heard a call to action to stand for the truth that diversity is not a social conspiracy theory – but a scientific fact of nature. In heeding the teaching on forgiveness, we are called to bridge the gap between rich and poor, between those who are “othered” and those who do the “othering”. The godly call of leadership is to work for this kind of a forgiving society – otherwise referred to as the kingdom of heaven right here in our midst.

Today, we will be hearing the teaching on *First is Last and Last is First*. This too is an original teaching. Put another way, the Bible also tells us that what the world made wise, God proved to be foolish. God did this so that the world could find wisdom is what the world thought was foolish. Each of us has much to learn from our blind spots. We shall see that if we are to in fact work for the kingdom, to win souls for God as the evangelicals might say, learning from our blind spots is key. And this is where Rev Eric will be going with his sermon today.

So, now, let us listen to our lesson, taken from Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, the landowner sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So, they went. When the landowner went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church. **Amen.**