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Bethel UCC
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Matthew 10:24-39

Courage from God

Will you pray with me?

God of Creation – God of so much that is out of our control – God who holds us and sets us free – may we trust in you. May we trust that discomfort, upheaval, even chaos hold beautiful potential – potential for the Kingdom of Heaven to draw near. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

This feels like a good moment to share with you all why I pray this prayer before my sermon. You may notice that the beginning changes each week, but usually the ending stays the same.

Part of this is the comfort of tradition – I grew up listening to my dad using these words at the start of his sermons. Ritual – tradition – a rhythm to life – has a way of comforting us.

Especially when so much around us and within us is changing – coming back to the same words, week after week can serve as a touchstone.

The comfort of tradition can sometimes mean that I'm not carefully considering the words as I say them. How often do we pray the Lord's Prayer without really even hearing or registering the words? We go into autopilot until it's over.

And that's the part we could work on. I think having traditions, coming back to the same words, week in and week out is a good thing.

But occasionally we should examine our traditions and the words we use. After all, words matter. Pay attention – anyone who tells you they don't, holds the power in this world and they get to choose the words.

And so, this week I reflected on this prayer. Particularly the Rock and Redeemer language.

God as our rock, our touchstone, our calm in the center of the storm – that is one of the powerful facets of who God is for me. Like a parent, a provider, a caregiver we can always count on – God will be here. Grounding us. Supporting us. Loving Us. God is our Rock.

Now – God as Redeemer. I didn't grow up in a church that spent much time dwelling on the Blood of Christ – the crucified Jesus as redemption for my sins.

I believe Jesus' crucifixion has a whole lot more to do with the powers that were deciding he was a threat, AND the powerful reminder that God is with the least of these – with the people, with the bodies, that are treated as expendable or worthless.

So, why if not for the blood of Chris, then redeemer? Because church, I do believe in God as my Redeemer.

Redeem means to atone or make amends for a past error or evil.

Some acts of redemption might be small – things we can carry out on our own.

We apologize for an unkind word, fix a thing which we broke.

But some things that need redeeming – a nation's brutal history of slavery, imprisonment, terrorism and targeted violence against whole groups of people based on the color of their skin – that is the kind of redemption I think we need help with.

God doesn't do it alone – we have to be participate! but God can give us the courage, the strength, the faith in our own innate worth – to begin the process of redemption.

To begin the work of atoning and making amends for a past evil.

And dear church – that is the work that has been before us for far too long. The work that's been before White Americans, that has been before the White Christian Church, for far, far too long.

Just read James Baldwin's words from the 1960s – they could've be written today.

We've been taking baby steps for far too long, thinking we've finished a process we've only just begun.

This process – the process of redemption – is one that will transform our whole way of being, in church, in schools, in our homes, in the public square of social media – in our very beings.

It will not be simple and it will not be quick.

But God will be with us on the journey – walking alongside as our Redeemer. And that's why I hold onto this prayer – because I believe I need redemption just as much as our country does. And that's a lot.

In this morning's text from the Gospel of Matthew, we pick up where we left on last weekend – listening to Jesus describe the journey ahead for the disciples – the journey of that takes place when the Kingdom of Heaven draws near.

And Lord knows – if any of us thought we preferred the New Testament God, because that God is “the nice one” – besides being theologically problematic, it’s not even accurate.

The God of the New Testament – the God of the Israelites – the God of Jesus – the God Jesus speaks of as Father and whose message Jesus brings – is not an easy-going, easy-loving, pushover kind of God.

Loving? Yes. Concerned? Always.

Demanding? Yup. Sees our potential and then holds us to it, like any good parent? Absolutely.

The word Jesus brings – the message he calls his disciples to carry into the world – is not a quick and easy, say one prayer, and you’re good, kind of message.

It’s a – this is going to be incredibly hard, challenging, turn your world upside down, make enemies of those you thought were knew – kind of message.

The path of following God – of hearing the truth that comes as a whisper in the night and proclaiming it from the rooftops – of being so grounded in who you are that not even the threat of death can shake you – this is not an easy path.

It’s a path that promises pissing people off – even to the point of danger.

It’s a path that promises a LOT of discomfort – and we, white folx, are not used to being uncomfortable.

It’s a path that will demand very hard choices – choices that go against every survival instinct in your brain.

“Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”¹

This path of following Jesus will demand sacrifice.

But here’s the thing – if you aren’t willing to sacrifice your life for another, if you aren’t willing to give up your comfort for another, if you aren’t willing to confront the reality of death which is coming for all of us – you aren’t really living your life anyway.

When we’re preoccupied with safety, comfort, our personal stuff, money, power, OR with the approval of other people – we’re living a sort of half-life.

And a half life is no way to live the one life we’ve been given.

¹ Matthew 10:39

As James Baldwin writes, “We have a responsibility to life. We must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those coming after us.”²

We have a responsibility to the generations coming after ours to take this life seriously. To really live it – in all the terrifying realness it demands.

And that means confronting the errors and evils of our past and of our present.

For Christians – for those who read these texts as holding important truth about our God – it’s going to mean a theological examination and atonement for all the ways our religion has oppressed and enslaved other people in the name of our God.

It’s going to mean grappling with texts that discuss masters and slaves – and learning the ways they were used to prop up the institution of slavery.

It’s going to mean learning the history, acknowledging the evil, making amends.

It’s going to be a hard journey.

But I don’t think we really have a choice about taking it. If we want to truly live these one, wild and precious lives we’ve been gifted – we’re going to have to do hard stuff.

We’re going to have to break out of our comfortable ignorance and grapple with a horrific history.

Because if we don’t... we’ll lose our lives anyway. We’ll lose our hearts, our souls, our spirits – the thing that makes us beautifully and uniquely human. We’ll lose our compassion, our empathy, our ability to hear God’s call for justice and to follow it forward.

We have a responsibility to life.

We have a responsibility to the generations who come after us.

We have a responsibility to all of creation.

God’s eye is on the Sparrow – and God’s eye is on you.

Beautiful, unique, worthy YOU.

God knows we can handle the discomfort, God knows we can bear great burdens once we’re willing to acknowledge the true and painful reality of the world we inhabit.

² “Letter from a Region of My Mind” by James Baldwin,

God knows we – you – are capable of great things.

And the greatest thing of all is love.

God loved you into being – God’s love, God’s concern for us – calls us all into life.

Don’t let the love of comfort steal your chance to live this life well.

Open your heart, strengthen your back, and find your courage in God – our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.