***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

John 12:20-33 Rev. Tyler Amundson March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

***Again and Again, We Are Reformed***

There is a phrase that actually comes from the field of journalism, but to which I have heard many preachers, my mentors included, adopt in their work of preaching.

“Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.”

Not too many churches have adapted this one as their mission statement. I would guess that is because it doesn't sound very much like the comforting taglines we have learned from businesses and advertising. In fact having taken some marketing classes in my education I can tell you most adverting experts would tell you to avoid the word “afflicted” at all costs. “Afflicted” is to harsh and the connotations too varied in contemporary English.

The other thing many of my preaching mentors and teachers shared was that most good preaching is done when the preacher is sharing on a topic that challenges even themselves. In other words, most preachers aren’t just preaching messages their people need to hear, but are preaching messages that push themselves as preachers to grow.

If I were to describe my experience of what Christ does in my life, I think I might share this phrase.

“Christ came to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” And while not a biblical phrase in my study of Jesus….it is true.

When I was in my first year of seminary, and living in my first big city I had a mental health breakdown. Between the pressure of school, a complete change to my location and way of living, and being newly married I am sure the pressured just piled up. Not to mention the fact that I had an un-diagnosed thyroid disorder wreaking havoc on my body.

I was, in no uncertain terms, a human train wreck. I remember laying in bed one day thinking I don't have the strength to lift my neck up, I should go across the street to Walmart and buy and neck brace. I also found a sling under the sink in our bathroom because I was convinced I couldn't hold up my arm either. This would go on for a period of several weeks until my amazing partner in life, Crystal sat me down and said, “Tyler, you are having serious problems. I need you to get a counselor and I need you to go the doctor.”

The last major part I remember from that time period was laying on the floor when we were moving apartments, while my friend's and wife moved our furniture because I just couldn't find the mental or physical capacity to continue.

I was the afflicted…and thank God I had the privilege of being able to rely on medical, psychological, and healing experts to find my way again. However, I know God had a hand in it too. One day right after Crystal had sat me down, I went for a walk in a city park near our home. It was a warm day, the sun lit up an incredibly blue sky and I laid down in the grass and just stared up at the sky with tears in my eyes. God…what do I do? I think my life is on the verge of falling apart, I think I am falling apart.

Something began at that moment to comfort me. Many times I have heard it described as the “still small voice,” and for me I believe it was God. I didn’t miraculously get better the next day, but over the course of time I had more experiences of God, medical and psychological help became readily available, and even that moment of failing is a part of who I am today.

In the book of Jeremiah found in our Bible, there is a passage that embodies “comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable.”

# Jeremiah 31:31-34

**31**The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. **32**It won’t be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the Lord. **33**No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **34**They will no longer need to teach each other to say, “Know the Lord!” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

Our scripture from the gospel of John has the phrase “**25**Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. **26**Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be. My Father will honor whoever serves me.”

Immediately after this a booming voice is heard by the crowd and Jesus shares that the booming voice was to seal this statement, so the crowd would know God meant this truly.

God meant that those who truly experience the faith of Christ would lose the lives the world tells them they should have. The world tells me, I shouldn’t share this story with you of a time when I was so afflicted I could not physically move, for fear that you might think it could happen again to me, and in turn not trust me to do anything of importance.   
  
God’s economy of grace instead says, if you have the faith of Christ you will risk sharing these stories, so others might know how God works through our frailties and insecurities to bring comfort to others. That we do not have to be perfect superhumans to change the world in God’s plan, but instead the finite imperfect beings that the universe our God has brought into existence. That God has and will continue to inscribe our very heart, the blood pumping, emotional center of our being to feed our whole soul, God will inscribe a love that will bind the universe together and bring us closer to the Kingdom of love.

In American Christianity there is a dangerous trend happening. That I believe draws us away from this deeply rooted understanding of God’s love. The name it has been given is the “prosperity gospel.” In that tradition I would look to my time of affliction as a time that I had failed to rely on God, and therefore my affliction was caused by a lack of faith. In turn the “prosperity gospel” would name that it was because I turned to God that I got better and in fact this same strand would argue the more I trust in God the wealthier I should become both in spirit and in physical blessings.

There is an incredible danger in this. It is true that by opening myself to God I made myself open to opportunities of healing in my time of affliction. However, I was afforded those privileges because of the place, time and even my genetic makeup. As a white cis gendered, heterosexual mail in the United States of America, and even as a Christian pursuing ordination as a pastor I met no challenges in accessing resources available for healing. Money, lack of discrimination, and access to affordable health care meant I could move ahead and find health.

This past year we experienced protests for the Black Lives Matter movement and we continue to experience the upheaval of our denomination about the inclusion of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more into the full life of our church. Both of these movements, in my experience, and from the relationships I have formed with fellow Christians and Methodists in these movements are cries from our God to reform how we invite people in our society and even in our church to experience God’s love. The experience of dream crushing oppression and the fact that people in these groups would not be afforded the comfort of their affliction that I received is troubling. Not that God would not support them but that our world would have trouble following God’s call to comfort their afflictions is a call for us to reform our very Christian walk in this age.

It is no question our churches are shrinking because we fail to speak to the afflictions of peoples hearts, and we at times in the church fail to allow ourselves to experience the afflictions of others in the world around us. We use “prosperity gospel” thinking to wall ourselves inside our privilege of comfortable homes, appropriate systems of care, and at times even our comfortable churches. Saying, “I have worked for these blessings, so I deserve them.”

I didn’t deserve healing to get up off the floor, to find medical experts and counselors who could sustain me, and my relationship with God has taken work, but there are others that our human systems are denying the very access to these realities.

So may comfort be inscribed on our hearts, but so may affliction to make us uncomfortable.

One of my favorite voices on this challenge is Kate Bowler, a woman we studied in our church a few years ago. Kate was afflicted with stage 4 pancreatic cancer just when she had achieved her dreams. She had a good home, a small child, a good husband and her dream job. Kate also studied the “prosperity gospel” as a sociologist. In her book, “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I Have Loved” she outlines that the danger of faith that does not afflict the comfortable is that those who are afflicted believe God does not love them.

In her book she shares the image of televangelism Rockstar duo Gloria and Kenneth Copeland. Gloria expects God to beyond fair, Gloria in her theology shares she expects God to reign down blessings. The story Kate Bowler shares is of a time when a tornado threatened the Copeland duo’s multi-million dollar mansion. They share the story of the two of them outside praying and yelling at the Tornado in God’s name and the tornado avoiding their house.

The image dwells in my mind too as I read Kate Bowler and listen to her work. The overwhelming message from people like the Copeland’s is that God is fair, it is an underlying tone of American Christianity, and of the “prosperity gospel.”

I don’t buy it though. I think a God who is fair does not account for the fact that while some people prosper others are floundering under human systems. While some that are afflicted are afforded the opportunity to rise from their station, others are never given the chance.

There are no simple answers in God’s kingdom of love. A God of love is not fair, we will face challenges that seem beyond understanding. We will make mistakes by not taking advantage of the gifts God puts before us. We will not be fair. But God will inscribe affliction and comfort on our hearts, and if we follow Christ we may just find ways to share both affliction and comfort for God’s purpose in the world.

I want to end by sharing a poem by Sarah Are may it be a blessing in your life.

**KEEP DIGGING**

I can feel change inside of me. It’s a slow burn.  
Change usually starts out hot— Defensive and angry,

A self-righteous blanket  
Of, “I am right and here’s why . . .”  
I wrap it around my shoulders  
Like a barricade.  
I fight the temptation to lean forward, To play the challenger,  
To argue with confidence.

But in time,  
Almost always,  
The heat fades.  
The air leaves the balloon. The audacity of it all Starts to wear off.

And eventually,  
What I am left with  
Is myself  
And a big, open sky.  
It’s colder here.  
It’s quieter.  
I can hear my thoughts.

And in this big, wide openness I am able to say out loud, “Maybe I wasn’t right.  
Maybe I need to learn.

Maybe it’s time for change. Maybe that’s okay.”

And if I’m quiet, and if I’m paying attention, I can usually hear God whisper inside of me, “Good work, my child. Now keep digging.”

By Sarah Are

Aflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted

Most of the time preachers preach for themselves

Scripture….written of God on my heart is that God will use all the pieces of me…the I cant lift my arm me and the one who is a strong compassionate husband, father, preacher and leader

The danger of American Christianity is we have at times made it a game of fair…it is why I admire the catholic church at times…they have never pretended it was fair

Kate Bowler and tornado people

God is not fair…

We need to be reformed

We should want for something more