

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Susan Scott, Guest Preacher

February 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 6: 25-33

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Running with Focus and Passion

Do you ever stop yourself and wonder “What is the point of the things I am doing? Am I simply going through the motions, checking off tasks, filling up my time, without any larger purpose?” When I was in my active parenting years, I often got caught up in driving from place to place, corralling the kids, without much thought as to why we were doing what we were doing. Underneath all that busyness, I knew what I was trying to do: invest in my kids in such a way that they would grow up to be responsible, mature, God-loving people. But I rarely caught my breath long enough to evaluate each activity for its worthiness. Now, as someone facing retirement in the next decade, I find myself pondering what I am going to do with all that free time which is coming my way. I certainly don’t want to succumb to endlessly amusing myself, or filling my time with pointless busy work. In fact, I’m convinced that my last laps could be my best laps, my most worthwhile laps, if I pay attention to the race. And what is true for us as individuals, is true for us collectively. What is it that a church is supposed to be doing, what is its larger purpose?

Does Jesus give us any help on this? Certainly. In our gospel lesson today, we caught up with Jesus mid-way through his Sermon on the Mount. He is talking to people, many of whom live much closer to the margins than any of us. In his audience are subsistence farmers whose families will go hungry if there is bad weather or a pest problem. These are people who would have considered it an extravagance to own two cloaks, people who knew life to be typically short and often brutal. Yet Jesus has the *audacity* to tell them not to worry about food and clothing. “What do you mean, Jesus, don’t worry about food and clothing? My whole life is consumed with worrying about feeding my family and keeping us warm. I’m supposed to believe that God knows that I need those things and instead strive for God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness?” Apparently, yes, according to Jesus. And if Jesus has the cheek to say that to people who could justifiably worry about those things, I can hardly imagine how strongly he might speak to us, who are surrounded by abundance. Don’t worry about what you look like, or how much money you earn, or how impressive your house is, or how new your car is, or which college your kid gets into — strive first for God’s kingdom and his righteousness.

Despite our curiosity about Prince Harry’s upcoming wedding, this language about kingdoms is a little alien to us. What is Jesus talking about, this thing he talks about more than any other subject in the New Testament? First off, he’s not talking about a physical place, like the old British Empire, he’s talking about a time, the time of God’s reign, that time about which the prophets spoke repeatedly, and told us would be characterized by the renewal of all things, by universal peace, prosperity, justice, health, and joy. Jeremiah looks forward to the day when God’s law is written on people’s hearts and everyone is full of the knowledge of God (Jeremiah 31: 31-34). And every time we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” we are praying for the goodness, and love, and justice of God to hold sway among us.

If “kingdom” is confusing language, “righteousness” is even more so. What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word “righteous”? (Solicit answers, if the congregation seems lively.) Self-important, rigid, judgmental people? A much younger friend told me about visiting his brother’s Christian college, and there was this student who wore a black shirt and a black hat, and across the hat - I kid you not - was written the word “HOLY” in giant letters. This guy wanted everyone to know that he was not going to commit any sin and he was going to bust you if you did! He was probably also the most uptight and unhappy person you’ve ever met! Yet Jesus is the one who is the embodiment of God’s righteousness and was a humble, merciful figure, who enjoyed parties and who was quite willing to let go of traditions if they did not serve God’s purposes. In the Biblical sense, righteousness is about things being right, not

in the artificial sense that you use the correct fork for the salad, but in the authentic sense of God's love ruling in every situation.

So Jesus tells us to stop pursuing the wrong things — I think it was Lily Tomlin who said “The trouble with winning the rat race is that you are still a rat.” I can easily imagine Jesus saying that — it's just the sort of direct and true and disturbing thing he might say. Stop pursuing the wrong things and pursue the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

We see this illustrated in the Apostle Paul's life. In our reading from 1 Corinthians 9, we hear Paul at his most intense best. I really like Paul, but know that is not a universally-shared perspective. He is, as we all are, shaped by his culture, and not all his opinions resonate well in the twenty-first century. But one of the things I admire about Paul is that he lived his life with focus and passion. This was true of him before his dramatic Damascus Road conversion (when his purpose was persecuting the church) and it was true of him afterwards, when his purpose was to share the gospel with anyone and everyone. Paul is commissioned by the Risen Christ to be Christ's ambassador to the gentiles. That calling is Paul's specific way of serving God's purposes, of striving for the kingdom of God. Your specific way will be different from Paul's, but you are also called to run your race with focus and passion for the furtherance of God's kingdom.

Focus: you have to know where the finish line is, what you are aiming for. I am not a very sporty person. It is our habit at the church I serve for the pastor who is going to be that week's preacher, to submit his or her sermon to the other pastors for peer review. One week I was reading Pastor Will's sermon and he had this puzzling line: “TB, wicked good!”. I looked at that, and looked at that, and scratched my head, and finally wrote in the margin “Tuberculosis? What are you talking about?” He shot back “Tom Brady!” Oh! I know who Tom Brady is, I even recognize his photo, and understand he is playing in a big game later today. But I certainly don't automatically think of him when I see the initials “TB”. But even I know this much: if you want to win your race, you must know where the finish line is and head toward it.

I got on your church's web site and was pleased to see this as your stated purpose: “our purpose as a church is sharing Christ and changing lives”. And on your bulletin cover it says “Creating a Christian foundation for families; Helping people learn more about Jesus; Living our faith beyond our walls by serving others”. Why, both of those sound like they come from the New Testament! That are great purposes for a church to embrace. My question for you, and it is a genuine question, is this: do you actually use those stated purposes to evaluate your programs and decide how to deploy your resources? Years ago, when I was serving as a solo pastor in another church, I had a man come into my office brimming over with excitement about a new fund raiser he wanted to see us launch. He described it in detail; it would require many volunteers — and yes, that is a way to get people involved — and dominate the church's schedule for an entire season. After he paused for breath, I searched for a polite way to ask “But what gospel purpose does this serve? Will people come to faith through it? Will God be worshipped? Will the poor be lifted up? Will justice be served? Will lives be transformed?” I don't think he was expecting my questions; it had never occurred to him to think about what larger purpose a church was to serve beyond meeting the needs of its own members and surviving as an institution. You have to know where the finish line is if you are going to cross it, you have to have focus.

Passion: Paul runs with focus and passion, a passion born out of his intimacy with God. He's not just a workaholic, someone covering over emptiness with work, or needing the acclaim of others to feel important or good about himself. Paul's goal isn't to plant more churches than anyone else or to preach more sermons than anyone else or to compose more letters than anyone else. He writes in Philippians “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death ... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Christ is at the finish line, cheering Paul on, and Paul is running toward him, fueled by his love for the One who met him on the Damascus Road and commissioned Paul as his ambassador.

Some of us may feel inadequate alongside the Apostle Paul, and some of us may just be uncomfortable with his focused passion. We'd rather live lives of quiet complacency, not rocking any boats, not making many sacrifices, not taking any risks, not being too “religious”. In addition to being a pastor, I am a spiritual director, someone who comes alongside individuals who are wanting to deepen their connection with God. In that capacity, if you told me you were uncomfortable with Paul's focus and passion, I would ask you to examine your discomfort before God, and ask the all-important question of why this disturbs

you. What are you afraid of? Honestly asking and answering that question could be very revealing and move you toward God. Let's take a moment and sit with that in silence. This conversation with God into which I am inviting you, is just between you and God, so I am pleading with you to make it real rather than right — that is, to be honest with yourself and God and dare to name before God the things which keep you from pursuing God's kingdom and his righteousness with focus and passion. silence... closing line of prayer... amen