

Friday, March 27, 2020 "In Touch"

Dear Friends,
I miss you!

All of us suffer the effects of “social distancing.” The “stay at home” orders are essential and save lives, but there is a psychological price that we pay. It is more than “cabin fever.” We thrive on human contact; we need relationships. And as we remain “cooped up” in self-imposed quarantines, we can suffer depression. The constant barrage of news about the virus adds a layer of anxiety. All of us are fearful, if not for ourselves, for loved ones. Many in our church are vulnerable, so we fret.

The pandemic has become more personal. My first pastorate was the Elmhurst Baptist Church in Elmhurst, New York. I was the pastor of that diverse congregation in that densely populated area for 15 years. It was a short walk from Elmhurst Hospital, a hospital that has been featured in many recent news reports. The hospital has had multiple deaths and COVID-19 cases that have overwhelmed the capacity to cope. Protective equipment is lacking, and a refrigerated truck is parked alongside the hospital to serve as a temporary morgue.

Oaklyn Baptist is a church that cares. Compassion is one of its wonderful qualities. We are a small congregation with huge hearts. And so we will continue to pray for those who are struggling with health, for those who are lonely and afraid, for those who serve in harm’s way, for health care providers and first responders, for grocery clerks and drug store cashiers and for all who serve while exposed to the virus. Pray for decision makers and all those adversely affected economically by the shutdown. We can compile our own lists of so many who need our support and prayers. Never have faith and trust been so valuable!

In the midst of our challenges, there are opportunities to rejoice and celebrate. World-wide shut-ins have found ways to sing and dance and exercise at a distance. Thousands of retired health care professionals have come out of retirement to join the “war” against the virus. Old and young have found ways to serve their neighbors and communities in the crisis. Social media have kept millions connected. Inspiring stories remind us that we are a large family of God.

Stay in touch. Schools are closed through April 15, at least. Church events will not resume until further notice. But we can stay connected. If you need pastoral counseling or just a comforting, reassuring word, you may contact the Reverend Dr. Souci Grimsley. Just let me or Cara know and we will get you in touch with her. All of the communication will be on the phone—maybe “face-time.”

Your communication with Souci is free, but valuable.

One of the scripture verses read today is popular, well known and often repeated. It is a favorite memory verse for Sunday school. At some sporting events, evangelicals hold signs displaying

the words “John 3:16.” For years Christians have memorized and repeated the verse. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”** It does seem to capture the Christian message in a single sentence. It is so familiar that its import may be lost on us.

It establishes the initiative of God. God does not respond with love; God does not react with love; God does not repay or reward with love. God loves us before we do a thing. And the phrase describes the ramifications of that love. Believers will enjoy a life that is at peace—at peace with others, at peace with God and at peace with themselves. This eternal life can begin immediately and transcend this existence.

Many things have changed since the days of the Bible. Plumbing has moved indoors. Communication and transportation have been transformed by technology. Globalization has become a reality. But humans have not changed much in their virtue and character. There is still a predisposition to selfishness, prejudice, violence, jealousy and more. We are all sinners, all prone to digress from what is right and good and kind and just. Our lives are messy, mired in dysfunction, warped by neuroses, damaged by our dna. And yet, God loves us.

Christians have used this verse to assert the necessity of believing in Jesus for salvation. Many have reiterated the verse as proof that a person has to accept Jesus as savior to be redeemed. The onus of salvation, the responsibility for redemption, the qualifier for eternal life has shifted back to human response and action. Do you believe? If not, you are damned. Do you believe in Jesus? If not, you are destined for hell. Where is the love of God? Can we merit, deserve, win, earn our salvation by doing the right thing or deciding the right thing or believing the right thing? It is God’s grace that saves.

What does it mean to “believe in him”? It could be construed to apply to a specific set of tenets, a particular series of beliefs, an assigned creed, certain standards of conduct or a check-list of theological conclusions. It might mean that you had to subscribe to an established understanding of salvation. Defined in this way, those who “believe in him” would be those who could attest to that code, that creed, that set of beliefs.

Christians, historically, have adopted norms that narrowed the field of eligibility. Those who believe in him have been reduced to those who were baptized in a certain manner, those baptized in a certain church, those of a certain sect or denomination, those who were not divorced, those who were “born again,” those with certain sexual orientation, those with a certain political alignment, and so on. We look for ways to filter, to exclude, to separate and divide, to restrict those who would qualify under this scriptural condition: whosoever believes in him. We have used this verse to discriminate and distinguish, rather than include. Christians have used this verse to omit and prohibit and limit and shut out.

But Jesus says that he came to save, not to condemn or judge, not to restrict. The verse does not say God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that only those who

believe in him will have eternal life. It says that God loved the world so much that even those who believe can be saved. It talks about the extent and excessiveness of God's love. It is about amazing grace. The intent and motivation is crucial to our understanding of what God is about.

I recall a poster I saw in a Native American museum. It was a parable. A man sat at the gate. Another man was going out to analyze the populace. "Where are you going?" the sitter asked. "I am going to find all those who are nasty and mean and grumpy." When the man returned, the sitter at the gate asked him how he had fared. "I found that most people have a bad attitude. They are crude and inconsiderate." Another seeker set out, and the sitter asked the same question. "I am going to find all those who are kind and nice," the seeker responded. When he returned, he was asked about his results. "Oh, I found so many people who were generous and gracious." A result is largely determined by the goal that is established. God is looking to save. God wants us to be redeemed. God is not looking to exclude, to damn, to judge. So we might expect God to be as inclusive as possible in applying the criteria for blessing.

Grace is always surprising, shocking, scandalous. And it will always contradict our sense of what is fair. Grace will always conflict with what is equitable. Mercy will always contrast with what is just. Grace is more than a reduced sentence; it is a commuted sentence. It is a free pass. It is usually outrageous. God loves us in spite of our fractured and broken nature. God loves us anyway.

Could we envision God as a teacher grading exams? The scripture asserts that God desires that everyone pass the course. God is not looking to flunk people. There are several things a teacher can do to help the students succeed. The teacher can tell the students what will be on the test. God has certainly told us what is important, what matters, what will determine our fate. The teacher can make the test easy or hard. Is the test true/false, multiple choice, or essay? Are there lots of dates or general concepts? The teacher can mark on a curve. In that case the passing score is lowered and more can meet the benchmark.

A teacher might give partial credit for coming close or for effort; the teacher could offer extra credit and make-up exams. Tutoring might be advised, with mentors and guides to assist. In several ways a teacher can make it clear that he or she wants the student to pass.

If we know that God wants to save the world, the phrase "whosoever believes in him" would and should be interpreted as broadly as possible. God gives us slack; God offers latitude. God is not out to trip you on a tricky theological point or to penalize you for failure to adhere to a lengthy list of beliefs or practices. God is looking for the good in each person, something that can be affirmed and nurtured.

Souci, my spouse, is like that. Whenever I get a little judgmental, she provides a corrective. She gives a rationale for the other person, a possible reason for their behavior. She attempts to interpret the action in the best possible light. Souci looks for what is positive in each and every

person, and it sometimes frustrates me. How can I get angry with the offenders when she provides such good excuses? She gives them all some saving grace.

I think God wants that from us. God's love is not a cause for our arrogance or condescension or boastfulness. We should become ministers of mercy. That may mean letting the pushy driver in front of us; it may mean letting the teenager cut in line; it may mean speaking to the relative who cheated you. Don't yell at the stupid clerk; don't fuss at the obnoxious driver; hold on to your "two cents' worth." Give someone a break. God recommends that we offer a reprieve, a pardon, amnesty. It is not easy. Why should we withhold our righteous indignation or our justified response? There is no good reason; that is grace. God loves us for no good reason. We can absolve others for no good reason, too. Forget old scores; disregard grievances; forgive mistakes. When we recognize the extent of God's grace, we are moved to praise and thanks, to humility and gratitude. And we are inspired to graciousness ourselves. Our God wants the world to be saved, because God loves the world. The whole world.

Our God wants the whole world to be saved, not judged. Sometimes we think of God as a tribal god, the God of our denomination or our race or our nation. And yet the Bible reminds us that our God is acting within the whole world. Every land and every person may be God's venue and field of activity. All divine attention is global. God cares about those who are malnourished, diseased, homeless around the world. God mourns the violence and hostilities making refugees of millions. And that God is acting through countless agents and instruments to bring peace and health and well-being.

So there is no compendium of positions that a person must take in order to be saved. There is no rundown of stances, no checklist of choices, no laundry list of dogma, no litmus test of virtue, no standardized test of core beliefs. Salvation does not depend on correct answers or a respectable score on a test of your comprehension. In fact, there is nothing you can accomplish or achieve that will attain or obtain your salvation. It is by God's grace.

I was speaking to my Hispanic counterpart at my last church. He explained how cemeteries in Puerto Rico were under the supervision of the Catholic Church before the war in 1898. Only Catholics could be buried in the cemeteries. There was a controversy in 1875 over the burial of a British hero. He was finally buried in the street. In Ponce, they had to construct an alternate cemetery for non-Catholics, since there was an Anglican community based at the consulate. In many towns in Puerto Rico there are adjoining cemeteries separated by a wall. One is for Catholics; one for non-Catholics. One cemetery even declared that heretics, adulterers and Protestants could not be buried in the Catholic cemetery.

This is reflective of our tendency to erect barriers, create divisions, make judgments and grade orthodoxy. We establish tests, filters, standards, confessions, dogma, creeds to define who is saved. As if it were up to us. God so loved the world that whosoever...whosoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. Jesus came not to judge, but to save. Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God? Do you believe that his gospel of love is authentic and authoritative? Do you

believe that God loves you and wants to save you? Because of that, do you love God and your neighbor? Congratulations; you passed the test. Grace is a gift. A gift is worthless if it is never used. My coffeemaker will not do me any good if it remains in the box. My new suit will not help my appearance if it remains in the wrappings. My father was given some beautiful shirts, but at his death they were all in their cellophane and plastic in a drawer. "Regifting" is the practice of giving someone else a gift that you had received.

Grace is a gift. It must be celebrated. It must be accepted. It must be shared. Grace is a gift that must be regifted. May God bless you all. May the peace and love of God overcome our fears, and may the Spirit of God keep us safe and connected!

Peace,

Pastor Kelly, interim