

Beloved Community: Leaving a Legacy  
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – September 27, 2020

Please read:  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

Today I invite you to reflect with me on the final pillar of our mission statement, “leaving a legacy.” The full statement reads, “As a *catalyst for social change* we strive to make a meaningful difference in the world and leave it a better place than we found it. We are committed to the ministry of the laity in society. We seek to be the hands and heart of God, loving others by sharing our time, talents, and resources, inspiring and empowering individuals to become all they can be, as well as creating just social structures.”

We remember Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg as a prime example of someone who has left an outstanding legacy, empowering women and the LGPTQ community to embrace basic civil rights. The fact that she is the first woman in the history of our country to lie in state at the capital is a perfect example of the need for creating more just social structures! Most of you probably don't know Francis Collins, but he is the Director of the National Institute for Health and winner of the Templeton Prize this past Thursday. Dr. Collins is a Christian and known for directing the Human Genome Project. His work has inspired research that will change the lives of billions of people for the better in the coming decades.

We all will leave a legacy, of course. The question is, what kind of legacy will we leave? In the reformed tradition, leaving a legacy is a stewardship issue. How will we use the gifts we have received to invest individually and as a community in helping others to have a better life and a fairer world? The vision is not just limited to our personal lives or even our church community. We are called to God's redeeming work for the larger society. This is a monumental task, particularly in these increasingly divisive times of our history. And even if we commit to leaving a legacy, the challenge is to know even where to begin and to what end.

I love the Philippians lectionary text for today. Here we find what is known as the *Carmen Christi*, the Song of Christ, perhaps the oldest extant text in the New Testament, likely a hymn sung in the early church. Here we find the core of Jesus' ethics in verse... that Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, and being obedient even unto death. The word here for emptied is *kenosis*, which means to empty... I can't think of a better summary of the way of Jesus. It's called downward mobility. It's a lifestyle not of grasping, but giving; not of taking, but sharing; not self-promotion, but considering others' needs above your own.

This is much easier to talk about than to live out. GK Chesterton once famously said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. Rather, it has not been tried because it has been found too hard.” When is the last time you have considered someone else more important than you? When is the last time that you put someone else's needs and priorities above yours? This is counter-cultural and sounds even more absurd in an election year when self-promotion is going off the charts. Most people just shrug and argue the way of Jesus is simply not realistic... But I want to challenge us all to dig a little deeper into this.

Jesus parable about the two sons is I think fairly straight forward: It's not what you say, but what you do. The first part of our lesson is about “authority.” Who's in charge and what's the branding and all that... But Jesus is really interested in who is writing the narrative of our lives? Who's the

author of what is ultimate for us and our life together? What are we generating by our thoughts, words, and actions? Jesus pushes this to an extreme... He isn't interested in religious stuff (remember, John talked about bearing the fruit of repentance, not just more religious activity). Jesus is interested in doing the work that needs to be done to realize a better life and a fairer world for all people. Even if it means giving up our lives.

I read in the local news recently about the three New Canaan men who were remembered as victims of the attacks on the world trade towers. Part of the ceremony also remembered the 412 first responders who lost their lives trying to save others and the 6,790 Americans who lost their lives in the wars in the Middle East since that time. It's complicated, isn't it? We give the highest honor to those who make the ultimate sacrifice. But we all hope that it won't be us!

This evening begins the high holiday of *Yom Kippur* for our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community. It is the holiest of holy days in the Jewish calendar and a time for confession of sins and the brokenness of our lives and our world. We have inherited an understanding of the importance of remembering, mourning, and lamenting the fact that our sins are too many to number, and we can only turn to God for forgiveness and grace so that we can turn again to live differently, more according to God's call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly... I'll never forget seeing at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem the saying, "The way of destruction is to forget. The way of salvation is to remember..."

So, as we are talking about leaving a legacy, we would do well to remember that someone is going to look back on our lives and life together. How will they see us? I'm personally not as interested in what others think, to be honest, but what God thinks. The best definition of sin that I've heard is simply, "not the way it's supposed to be." I want to leave a legacy of trying to live into God's priorities and values, into the reign of God's love in all areas of life, in my inner being, in my relationships, and in the larger social structures and systems of our world.

I have been doing research on the local history and am enjoying the book, *Portrait of New Canaan*, by Mary Louis King published by the local historical society. In the early history of this area, it recalls the tragic massacre of over 500 *First Nation Peoples* in Bedford, NY, just seven miles from our house. But the same day, I saw a video sponsored by "Staying Put in New Canaan" that featured Pat Stoddard and Jane Stoddard Williams and Allison Williams and how growing up here they experienced New Canaan as an ideal community with neighbors who showed care and respect for one another. I was encouraged to learn that for the Black Lives Matters rally, when only a handful was expected, several thousand turned out!

In fact, we all need to remember that we have limited time here on earth... One of my favorite sayings is "the days are long, but the years are short." And we are making choices every day. It was C.S. Lewis who rather dramatically asserted that "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before...you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature." I would argue also that every time you make a choice you are turning the world around you into a more heavenly place or hellish place! We don't need to get neurotic about this, as the Scottish have a saying that *God writes straight with crooked lines*. But we are called to be more reflective and purposeful if we are to be a Beloved Community.

By this deceptively simple parable, though, Jesus calls the naysayers, and even his enemies into an open future, one not dominated by the arguments and opposition of the past, but one that is open to God's spirit to heal, revive, restore, and make all things new. That's good news for us, but the bad news is that usually to move toward God's open future it means first acknowledging past wrongs. Facing the dark past and the shameful ways in which we or our ancestors got it wrong is the only way to move toward the freedom of something really new. My dad was a math teacher and the first thing he'll tell you about math is you'll never get a problem solved until you go back and fix the errors in your calculations.

Unfortunately, it's too often the religious folk who are unable to move on. We forget that we are called Beloved Community and called to share God's love with all. I learned at our Presbytery meeting last week that current research shows white Christians are twice as likely to deny the fact that there is systemic racism that needs to be addressed in our country. That's right, non-religious whites are two times more likely to agree that there are social evils of racism that we must address. Clearly, there is such a thing as "bad religion"!

In Jesus' day, the chief priests and the elders did not accept his invitation. They refused to repent, "to change their minds." They had too much at stake in the past. The past created their identity and they were dependent on that identity, so they refused to trade their identity for an open future.

But those who are down and out, those who are desperately asking "Is the Lord among us or not?" and those who discover that the identity created by their past doesn't bring them life – the tax collectors and prostitutes – they grab hold of Jesus' promise with both hands.

Jesus extends the same invitation and makes the same promise to us. No matter what we have done, no matter what has been done to us, by God's grace, *the future is still open.*<sup>[1]</sup>

We of all people should be free to give of all that we have and all that we are to leave a legacy of love. We serve a God who gave everything to show us love and offer to us the paradox of another way, where God can bring new life even out of death, of letting go, of giving up. The first shall be last, and the last first. You must die to self to experience a new birth and a new life. This is the "deeper magic" of Narnia, the way of the cross that opens up the way for Easter new life.

So, I invite you in this coming week to reflect on the legacy you are leaving, that we are leaving as a community. Is this the legacy to which God is calling us? What parts of our past do we need to acknowledge, ask forgiveness, and turn away from so that we may be free to take hold of the open future to which God calls us? Who are the people, our neighbors, even our enemies, who we are called to consider better than ourselves, and to whom we are called to give it all away for love?

This is what Beloved Community does... we live spiritually, love inclusively, learn continuously, and we leave a legacy of God's generous grace and love for all.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*