

Pastor Roy's Sermon from February 9, 2014

Children's sermon:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 58 defines what it means to seek the Lord. Seeking God is not pleading for mercy so that I can have the good life for myself and those for whom I care. To seek the Lord is to live the Reign of God by sharing mercy with others. It's not about me, but about us. No one is excluded.

It is to clothe the naked, provide food for the hungry, a home for the homeless, to satisfy the needs of the afflicted, the ill, the wounded, the broken.

This is no small task. Compassion puts us out. It's inconvenient. Sure, it feels good to help someone who needs help, but the needs can be staggering and we're not sure at times even how best to help.

A couple weeks ago, I said it is a struggle to respect people when we disagree or have conflict because of our own frustration. Love calls us to take the time to think about how and why we responding the way we are. We place ourselves in their shoes. We imagine why they might think and act the way they do. What makes them "tick?" Hopefully others do the same for us.

Likewise, the first step before we can help anyone is to consider what it would be like to experience life where they stand. Otherwise, what are we doing and why are we doing it? The reign of God begins with the dignity, and respect we know as children of God and moves us with compassion. That is what it means to live in the reign of God.

Love is not first and foremost about "me." True compassion is about setting "me" aside and focusing on the other whom Jesus calls "neighbor."

Paul reminds us that the ultimate example of loving neighbor is Jesus' death on the cross. When Paul came to Corinth, he proclaimed only Christ crucified. He also talks about the "mind of Christ." The mind of Christ is the unifying force of love which is willing to let go for one's neighbor. Though at times Christians interpret Christ crucified as God's strategy for personal salvation, Paul rather speaks of Christ crucified as Jesus faithfully living the mercy of God even unto death. Christ crucified sets God's people free to live without fear because as death did not restrict Christ, so it need not restrict us in our freedom to live faithfully.

It is not merely a way for us to spend eternity with God, Christ crucified for Paul is *the* revelation of eternity with God. As John says of Jesus, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We could say, the cross is the way and the truth and the life. There is no other life than to entrust ourselves with Christ into the mercy of God, the compassion of God, the love of God which knows no bounds, no limits, no exceptions. The life of the cross is relentless. But the cross is the way to experience true life. Yes, it sounds like foolishness. True humility sounds foolish. The disciples didn't want Jesus to die. That made no sense. But for Christ Jesus, it is the only way to live is to let go of our desperate clinging to "me" and "mine"--even "ours," and embrace freedom and mercy.

All of this is much easier to proclaim than for any of us to practice. But we keep trying to live the cross life of Christ which Paul proclaimed—this reign of God. Moment by moment—whether we feel successful or not. The mercy of God is not granted to those who are somehow successful, but mercy flows like a river, it is available to us, we partake and we share. A river, an ocean, clouds of mercy. Water is a great picture of life in the reign of God.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus also speaks of us being salt, and light. He also tells us that we better exceed the righteousness of those who are only concerned about being good for their own sake. Righteousness is about loving neighbor, the ones we like and the ones we are tempted not to like. But

our salvation is wrapped particularly in loving the ones we are tempted to hate because only then do we feel the nails of the cross and spear of the soldier and the taunts of the waffling crowd as Jesus says, "Father, forgive them."

When we try to love those we are tempted to despise, to love those when our instinct tells us to flee, we start to learn why Jesus was willing to die for the very poorest, the very weakest, the least powerful and the most. We start to "get" the kingdom, the reign of God.

The reign of God is the only life that is worth living. Nothing else will satisfy. Nothing else will release us from the unending need to prove ourselves, to defend and protect ourselves. Nothing else will set us free to trust in the cycle of mercy. We receive, we share, we receive, we share. It is the kingdom of God. The cross reveals this Reign of mercy. May we continue to learn and practice the secret of mercy. Amen.