



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
May 13th, 2018
Sermon: “Whose Giving Knows No Ending”
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Psalm 1
John 17:6–19

A dozen baby chicks for one dollar! This was all seven-year-old Maria needed to hear that day at the Easter street fair. She threw down her big money and paraded her crate full of chicks into the living room of her family’s tiny New York City apartment.

They were her pets now – her babies. The whole dozen. She named them (*Piew-Piew* and Sunshine and Elvis and Little Ricky). She had them exercise each day up and down the hallway, she trained them to sit, and she sang them to sleep in their cardboard bed in the bathtub.

As these city chicks grew into hefty chickens and roosters, they began taking over the entire apartment. Her mamá was always ready to cut one of their heads off for dinner. Finally, her papá couldn’t take it anymore and told Maria that it was time for the pets to go. He said he had a farmer friend who would take good care of them. So, with a heavy heart, she said goodbye to her babes and prayed that they would enjoy their new life on the farm somewhere.

Well, a few weeks later she stopped into the bodega market on her way back from school, when she heard some commotion in the back room. Curious, she followed the noise and found herself amongst a group of men in suits shouting loudly. They were standing in a circle and holding up wads of cash. Two roosters fought in the center. One was big and aggressive. The other was trembling and bleeding all over. Maria was horrified. A mother knows her own. The trembling rooster was her, *Piew-Piew*.

Without a second thought, she pushed through the crowd, grabbed *Piew-Piew* and flew out of that bodega, leaving a trail of angry shouting behind her. When she got up back the apartment, she spent hours singing familiar lullabies to calm his shaking and applying handfuls of Vick’s vapor rub to his wounds.

I have heard my mother tell this story about herself many times before, but the question that I am always left asking is: “Weren’t you afraid? You were seven – standing in a room full of powerful strangers – and you jumped into the center of the ring to rescue a rooster.”

Mom always laughs and says, “He was mine and he needed my help. I guess in that moment, I just felt *fearless*.”

~

I wonder if Jesus ever felt *truly* afraid. After all, he spent his entire life running towards danger, jumping into the ring (if you will) again and again and again, giving everything he could to those most in need.

We all know that he had quite a reputation for ruffling feathers, for going against the grain, for upsetting countless religious leaders and practitioners of the day. Life was surely hard enough for any Jewish person living under Roman rule, let alone one with a divine fire in his belly to break down systems of oppression and to dare folks to imagine a different way of living and loving.

No matter how Jesus was feeling deep inside, on the outside he modeled a ministry of *fearlessness* - and his disciples faithfully followed him into the most unexpected, vulnerable spaces.

In this morning's text, we find Jesus in an especially vulnerable state - in his final moments of freedom before his arrest. Tucked away in an upper room, he breaks bread with his friends, shares words of blessing, charges them to carry on - and then looks up to heaven and prays to God.

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me...." He says.

In this moment in John's gospel, Jesus does not express being afraid of death at all - he doesn't ask for this cup to pass over, he doesn't beg for his fate to change. He accepts what must come and his concern rests solely on protection for his disciples.

In a time of such utter chaos, Jesus could pray for his friends to find a safe hiding place or to retire their efforts - instead he asks for them to get into the ring and to continue his holy work with even greater intensity: Give. Unite. Speak truth. He says in his prayer. And do this with a fearless spirit...for generations to come.

What does it mean to fearlessly give?

As Christ's disciples today, we know what it is like to live in a society dictated by fear. The news headlines. The vicious tweets. The ICE raids. The deals broken. The pervasive rhetoric of "us vs. them." All the blaming and shaming. Fear has this capacity to be a catalyst for isolation and individualism. It dismantles our human connection, it clenches our fists, and turns our backs towards one another.

Jesus calls us to combat fear with increased *generosity* and authentic engagement - no matter the circumstance, no matter the cost.

He prays: *"The words that you gave to me I have given to them...
Protect them. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them."*

Anne Frank and her family were forced to go into hiding in April of 1942. They lived in a tiny secret annex in Amsterdam for nearly two years (along with four other people). They

couldn't go outside, they couldn't look out a window, they couldn't speak for much of the day. Fear was the oxygen they breathed. At any moment they could be caught, taken away, and killed – simply for being Jewish.

The Frank family lived in a world that had allowed fear and frustration to fester so much so that groups of people were now being considered dangers to society. Jews, gypsies, the differently-abled, LGBTQ folks were all being taken away by the millions and murdered in death camps across Europe.

For the past three months, I have had the privilege to journey in Anne Frank's mother, Edith's shoes by way of the Asheville Community Theater. Some of you got the chance to experience the show (and I am so grateful for that).

Becoming Edith meant learning about her life, entering into her story and embodying her pain and resilience. Edith was someone who gave of herself in profound ways.

Although she privately wrestled with fear and depression, she carried on with her role as "mother." She was strict and protective and often clashed with her daughter, Anne. She was also tender and sensitive and believed in the power of human touch to comfort the soul.

After they were discovered and sent to concentration camps, Edith gave up her shoes in hopes to get bread for her daughters. And any food she received from then on, she tucked away for them (even long after they had been separated). In January 1945, Edith died of starvation in Auschwitz.

Her story is heart-wrenching. But her heart has much to teach us about what it means to live as fearless people of faith. To give that much. To love that much. To embody our role that much - no matter what.

What does it mean to fearlessly unite?

Jesus says: *"Protect them in your name that you have given me so that they may be one, as we are one."*

When we think about this word protection, we might imagine building up walls, drawing lines in the sand, holding up our shields. How interesting that Jesus asks God to protect his disciples so that they may be more unified: "one" with one another and "one" with Christ.

Fostering equitable community is no easy task. After all, we are products of a divided world, where power is not shared, where prejudice still dominates, where people are motivated by jealousy and greed. It is hard to imagine that we can ever find a way to really live as one.

In Harper Lee's classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout has decided that she does not want to return to school. Today was her first day – ever – and it didn't go well. First of all,

they made her wear a dress. Second, the teacher reprimanded her. Third, she got into a big fight in the playground.

Her father Atticus walks onto the porch to sit beside her. He holds her close and says with a gentle smile: *"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."*ⁱ

Jesus did just that. God looked out at the world – and all its brokenness – and instead of turning away, God chose to get into the ring like never before – to climb into human skin and walk beside us. God came to empathize and engage and empower, to understand, to upset and to unify.

Bishop Thomas Briedenthal writes that when Jesus walked among us he recognized the world as something *good*. And he called the world back to its true nature as an interconnected whole. *And why not?* This is what “world” means: wholeness, oneness.

As Jesus prays for his disciples in the upper room on that Passover night, he asks for them to remember the purpose of his incarnation. He wants them – and us – to see this world through his eyes - as an interconnected body created as “one”.

What does it mean to fearlessly speak truth?

These days, it can be hard to decipher fact from fiction. We receive information from within our own echo chambers, we listen to people who think like us, speak like us, look like us. It seems that every group abides by its own version of truth.

“Sanctify them in the truth,” Jesus says. “your word is truth.”

“Sanctify” in this case means to set ourselves apart. And “truth” refers to what Christ taught us through his life and ministry. That night, Jesus prays for us to “set ourselves apart” from the rhetoric that seeks to divide and scapegoat. Christ invites us to be courageous enough to speak radical truth to power – God’s truth – for all the world to hear.

I remember my first day sitting in Rev. Dr. James Cone’s Systematic Theology class. I was just beginning seminary. I was excited and naïve. Dr. Cone, who sadly passed away just two weeks ago, is known as the Father of Black liberation theology. He preached with “fire” that God is on the side of the marginalized, not on the side of those who oppress.

He was a true giant in his field (and also a kind-hearted soul). He spoke hard truth to his students each day while slamming on the podium and sweating through his clothes. He tore open our faith and forced us to see Christ anew.

“White people will never understand suffering,” he said. They will never understand God. They can never be Christians until they listen and recognize the truth when it is spoken by the oppressed.

“Truth,” he said “is divine action entering our lives and creating the human action of liberation.”

Here at Grace Covenant, the Racial Justice Book Club had the chance to read his most recent book, “The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” in which Cone makes a striking connection between the cross (where Jesus’s body was publically crucified) and the lynching tree (where black bodies across America – and here in Buncombe County - were murdered for all to see).

In Dr. Cone’s book, he boldly critiques Christians for our participation in white supremacy throughout the generations. His fury pours out of each page. But what is most stirring perhaps, is how he concludes the book: with unexpected grace. He writes:

“All the hatred we have expressed toward one another in America cannot destroy the profound mutual love that flow deeply between us. No gulf between blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality. What God has joined together, no one can tear apart.”ⁱⁱ

Dr. Cone speaks the sort of truth that Jesus challenges us to share. Even in the midst of a tumultuous history and present, even in the midst of anger and terror, we can still believe that generous healing and radical unity are always possible.

Friends, we don’t know if Jesus was ever *truly* afraid, but we do know that he wanted to protect those he loved. He uses his final moments with his disciples to pray for them – for their ministry, for their calling to engage in the world. And still today, God prays for us.

There is nothing hypothetical about following Christ. This is daring, dangerous work. It is never finished. And we can’t do it alone. We need each other.

Together, we go to the hardest places, down the paths least traveled, towards the most vulnerable among us, seeking difficult and divine truths, giving fully no matter the cost.

When we do this, we embody Christ here and now, we trust in his prayer, we heed his call to: fearlessly give, fearlessly unite, fearlessly speak truth.

Know who and whose you are. Jump into the ring. And don’t be afraid.

ⁱ Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Grand Central Publishing. 1960.

ⁱⁱ James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. New York: Orbis Books. 2011.