

A Faith Wide Open – John 13:31-35; Acts 11  
Ozaukee Congregational Church – April 17, 2016

Following the death of Christ, the first disciples, his initial recruits, needed to learn a difficult lesson. The message of Christ was not about them – the message of Christ is about all the good things that happen despite our failings. It was not about their individual wants and desires – it was all about God. Based on this lesson, we are reminded that worship is a time when we come in celebration of God and looking forward to our future in his presence. We learn that love conquers evil and that our faith opens us up to the movement of our God.

When we gather to hear the message of Christ, we are anointed with the message – a huge gift of love. We are fortunate in this respect. As American Christians, we assume we have open access to this message and our God – it is a right as well as an opportunity. In the time of this writing, open access to God and to the blessings that God bestows was not considered automatic. There were severe distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and even some disagreements about how the message could or should be shared. And, of course, there was an argument over for whom the Christian message was intended.

Centuries and centuries later, the question still remains and ruminates in my mind: if the message of the Gospel is love, how do we share this message in a world that is highly segmented and competitive with people who are more and more isolated?

Many people in our culture, including pastors, see bigger as better. The more people attending, the more important the place. Forget the work of the spirit, or quality above quantity, the first question seems to be: how big is the congregation. Also, the flashier the worship, we assume the more the message will stick. But the message is so simple, big and open: to love and be loved. Love others the way that God loves us and allow our God to love us.

When it comes to the lessons of scripture, we need to be academic students of the scripture; we need to be spiritually fed by the pursuit of meaning. When the church is really embodying and reflecting the message and spirit of Christ – it is not a boring place at all. Good theological understanding leads to spiritual openness and that spiritual openness leads to good theological understanding. This is a very joyful circle to be caught up in and it can happen among ten people as easily as it can happen with 100 people.

In the Jewish tradition, there were many laws about what was clean and unclean. The disciples were going out to spread this message of Christ and they were encountering both groups and ministering to all those they met along the way. They encountered difficult questions, but the spirit moved among the disciples and the people who heard the message desired to follow after Christ.

Who am I that I can hinder the openness of God? This is a good question for each of us to ask ourselves. God calls us to service of the poor: who am I to hinder God? God calls us to tell a friend the message that there is hope in this world...who am I to hinder God? You might say, “I have a really hard time talking about Jesus.” Perhaps you are not excited about this message, and the idea of trying to communicate this to someone else is daunting; or it’s possible that you know his message but you know it so well that you are overwhelmed with the idea of trying to communicate this glorious news.

The proof of the power and reality of our faith is not in the content of the Sunday sermon and not really in how diligently we study scripture. For more than a thousand years, Christians came and went without ever having a chance to read the scriptures of the Bible – to be able to read these words for ourselves for discussion and prayer is a huge privilege! Others were never given the opportunity, and as always, the proof and power of our Christian faith and our Christian life is in the movement of the Holy Spirit.

This movement is shown in a variety of ways. It is shown in our intellectual understanding of scripture. It is shown in our commitment of time, energy and resources to our church. The movement of the spirit is shown when we decide to sit for the first time and page through the texts of the Bible. The power of the Holy Spirit is felt when we realize that there is nothing that we can do that will really hinder this powerful, wonderful and loving God.

This is about our God. This is about his message that in Christ we are offered repentance and hope that leads to the life God desires for each of us. Faith leads to hope and life – that Christian faith is about bringing people together in worship and service – dedicating ourselves to God because without God we would be nothing. When the church is really embodying and reflecting the message and spirit of Christ – this church is not a boring place at all. This church becomes the place where we gather to celebrate and decipher who we are as God’s people and what we are going to do about it.

There is enough to go around and we must love one another. We need to watch out for one another. The absence of the spirit and the temptation to be highly critical of the lives and work of others is extreme. We need to love one another. This is not simple. But what about the story of our faith from a virgin birth to a bloody death among thieves – what makes us think that we have become a part of something that is easy?

We might say that some people are too difficult to love. We might think that we are too difficult for God to love, but God loves us anyway. And he loves those difficult people out there and you should love them too. In the midst of love, there always seem to be exceptions. In people we love, we put up with behavior we would not tolerate from others.

We need to figure out where God is calling us in his awesome love. We need to love one another to show that we are, in fact, followers and disciples of Christ

our Lord. We need to love because this act will open us up to the wide world that God wants us to see and share his Grace among all people.