

“Spiritual Teachings”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
May 15, 2016

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 67
New Testament Lesson: John 14:22-27

Ann Weems in her book *Family Faith Stories* tells of a time she was in Wisconsin at a ministry conference. Before supper the first night, a man with a southern accent came up to her and asked, “Where are you from?” When she responded, “Nashville,” he smiled and ... (asked) ..., “Who are your people?” Ann recalls the surge of memories that swept over her. “I knew what it meant,” said Ann. “To whom do you belong?” “It is an ancient question. It’s a means of identification, a claiming of ties.” It can instantly open doors or shut them in your face. “My father is Tom Barr,” replied Ann. The man’s face lit up with a look of recognition. He told the people with him, “She’s one of us! She’s Tom Barr’s daughter.” They gathered around and led her to their table, talking about people they knew 25 years ago in Nashville. Looking back on that, Ann recalled “I belonged,” “I was accepted. I know who my people are.”¹

As I read that about Ann Weems – and I know she meant it to be nice – but as I read it, I thought it was kind of sad. I mean, look at it from the perspective of other people, those who aren’t connected to Tom Barr, those who aren’t from Nashville. Would they feel like they belonged?

What happened at that conference for Ann Weems happens everyday in this world. People make connections based on age, gender, political leanings, income, neighborhood, and just plain whatever it is that they are geeked out about – what they love to dig into as a hobby or pastime.

That’s how the world works. And yet, Jesus says, “... I do not give to you as the world gives. ... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Jesus’ peace is one that breaks down the social barriers that have people feeling left out. We as a church and as Christians out in the world are to look for and bring in those who would otherwise be left out. Jesus did a lot of that during his earthly ministry, didn’t he?

And so for us, while it is only human to gather with those who are like us, when we do so at the expense of making others feel left out, that’s a problem. It’s going to happen – there’s no doubt about that – but we should not let that become the norm.

How do we remain mindful of the feelings of others in the hustle and bustle of life? How do we know who is safe to associate with and who is leading us in the wrong direction?

¹ Ann Weems, *Family Faith Stories* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 18-19.

Jesus tells us how to know how to act, saying, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me, says Jesus, “does not keep my words....” Keeping Jesus – words.

Remembering how to act like a Christian in social situations means remembering the words of Jesus, and keeping to them, acting differently because of them. The words of Jesus come to us from nearly 2,000 ago, and that’s a problem. That’s a long time to remember what someone said and then figure out how to apply it in our lives.

Thank God that we are not in this all alone. Not only do we have a record of what Jesus said, we have an Advocate to help us interpret it – the Holy Spirit, whom, says Jesus, “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

How does the Holy Spirit go about teaching us? That’s a tough question. But an important one! If you can’t say how it is that you learn from or tap into the Holy Spirit, how can you be sure you’re not being led astray or acting badly in a given situation?

I’ve given this a lot of thought – and prayer, and study – and I’ve got an idea of how the Holy Spirit teaches us. The Holy Spirit teaches us through prayer, through study, through scripture, and through other people. As we look at each of these in turn ask yourself if you are tapping into the spiritual teachings available to you in any given situation.

The first is prayer. There are lots of ways to pray. Prayer can be anything from asking God to show you what to do to merely holding a question loosely in your heart, and being open to have God lead you step by step. The point is being open to changing our decisions or expectations based on what God is saying to us. Prayer is an openness to change.

The second one I mentioned is study, get more information. By getting more information about on an issue or situation, we guard against hearing only one side, we guard against being led astray.

Then there’s scripture. Everything we do and believe should be based in scripture, which itself requires study. To correctly interpret scripture and apply it to day-to-day life, we have to know something about the Bible – its origins and how God moves through the Bible.

And finally, other people. This is the most important way to know what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, and the most difficult to interpret, the hardest to be sure about. We were not left all alone when Jesus ascended to Heaven. God sent to us the Holy Spirit to teach us and remind us of how to act. And whether God’s word comes to us through prayer or study or scripture, we are always left to interpret it in relationship to other people.

“Those who love me will keep my word,” says Jesus. Jesus points to love as a central concept in keeping His words in mind and acting on them. What is it to love Jesus, and in doing that, to love your neighbor as yourself?

A group of children ages 4 to 8 were asked, “What does love mean?” Listen to some of their answers:

Rebecca, age 8: “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That’s love.”

Chrissy, age 6: “Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

Tommy, 6 years old: “Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

Elaine, 5: “Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.”

Lauren, 4: “I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones.” And finally, 6-year-old Nikka: “If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate.”

How did these young people come to know so much about Christian love and how we ought to treat people? The Holy Spirit. How well we treat other people is a direct reflection of how well we are aligned with the Holy Spirit. Nobody’s perfect at this. We can all do better. And that, above all else, is what God desires for us.

In any given situation, God wants you to turn to his word in knowing how to act. God wants us to treat people with love and respect. God wants us to come from a place of humility and self-reflection, able to stretch and grow in the Spirit.

If you’re not coming from a place of love and respect and humility in a given situation, step back and pray about it – are you feeling the Holy Spirit guiding you? If not, that’s a signal that you might not have the whole picture, you might need some more information on the issue. Take time to study it from all sides. And then check that against what you know in scripture. Turn to the word of God and align yourself with the Spirit of Christ. And always, always, always check in with other people. God did not leave us alone, so don’t go it alone. Get a different take on the situation when your back is up against the wall and it doesn’t feel right, when your words and actions are driven by something other than love of God and neighbor.

Whatever challenge or decision you are facing in life, you are not alone. Jesus has left us with his word and pointed us to our love of God. That’s why God sent us the Holy Spirit – to help us remember the words of Jesus and show us how to love like Christ.

We have been given access to the Holy Spirit that we might bring to life the words and actions of Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of creation, you formed us out of your incredible love and breathed life into us. By your Spirit, breathe new life and faith into our daily living.

Lead us to life eternal, by the mighty love of Jesus Christ.

O God, show us the power of reconciling love. On Pentecost, you filled your disciples with strength, vision and confidence. Do so again, here and now.

Bring upon us in this time of celebration, a new sense of your life-giving Spirit.

We pray your Spirit of comfort on all those who grieve, your Spirit of generosity upon us when faced by any in need, and your Spirit of healing for all who are sick or recovering from disease or other medical problems.

We pray all this in the name of your son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**