

"I Second that (E)Motion"

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

March 17, 2024

Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Thank you for the warm welcome from your leaders and now, I trust, from you. One thing I noticed as I entered Woodbury is a sign that said: Woodbury: Connecticut Antiques Trail. And I thought: "I'll fit right in."

Let us pray: Lord, bless these words, finite and imperfect, that they may point to the infinite and perfected Word revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

For many years before he became a United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. After one Sunday worship he asked a woman how she was and she said, *"I'm annoyed. I came here looking for comfort, and instead Jesus gave me an assignment."*

Friends, I'm here. I'm not at all annoyed. But Jesus definitely gave me an assignment. I knew of your trouble, you see: this year from the news, and 20 or so years ago when a pastor's misconduct rocked the church. So my wife Carol Galloway and I prayed for you, Bishop, and the Cabinet, in the devotions we share each morning. We knew folks were hurting and we hurt with you.

I knew other things, too, like that there weren't many United Methodist clergy available, especially in the middle of the appointment year. In fact, a United Methodist Church 15 minutes from my home has been without a pastor since September. But what could we do? I mean, I'm retired.

Then four Saturdays ago – February 24th – Carol and I were in the kitchen on a rare Saturday morning with no commitments. We spoke of you and the Bishop and I said, *"Do you want to talk with the Bishop? I can call him."* And Carol looked at me like I had three heads and said, as if in a daze *"You can call him?"* I said, *"Yes."* While she hesitated, I called.

Twenty minutes later when we hung up the phone, she looked at me and said, *"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"* And I said, *"If you're thinking Woodbury, yes."* That afternoon I wrote to the Bishop. Three days later I received a call from the Superintendent. Eleven days later I met with your Staff-Parish Relations Committee. Four weeks later, here am I.

Oh, did I mention the scripture that was in the devotion on that Saturday morning? It was Jesus, speaking in Mark's Gospel: *"If any want to become my*

followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” How similar to John’s Gospel today: *“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”* So I am convinced I am here by the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit and God’s grace. Jesus gave me an assignment. I know you need his comfort and healing. But he will give you an assignment, too.

Let me clarify one thing. There are many feelings about this most recent betrayal, anger and mistrust among them. Rev. Hibbard did a masterful job in his message to you on March 3rd. I do not want my affection for, and access to, Bishop Bickerton to be misunderstood. I do not know what was known and when it was known. These are questions that may be asked of the Superintendent next week. What **you** should know is that what you say to me stops with me. It doesn’t go to the Bishop, the Superintendent, or anywhere else. If a clergyperson cannot be trusted to keep a confidence, he or she has lost the trust of the people. I do not claim much for myself, but I claim this: I keep confidences. I keep my mouth closed. The only secrets I must share is if I have reason to believe a child is being abused or if I have reason to believe a person may harm themselves. I know that’s heavy, but I want you to know.

On a lighter note, and particularly in light of Carol standing with me for the recognition a few moments ago, you should know that we keep lots of secrets from each other! As a physical therapist, she is bound by HIPPA laws. As a pastor, I am bound by confidentiality. What you say to one of us is not said to the other, unless you ask for that.

Okay, so about that Gospel from John: let’s take a look. Some Greeks (Gentiles, non-Jews, outside the covenant) want to see Jesus. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Me, too. You, too, right? It’s what we just sang, after all:

*“We would see Jesus, in the early morning,
still as of old he calleth, ‘Follow me!’
Let us arise, all meaner service scorning;
Lord, we are thine, we give ourselves to thee.”*

I know you want to see him because I hear the hope and see the dedication of your leaders. And I have a sacred calling to help us all do that. In fact, in the early years of the last century it was common in some Protestant

churches to affix these words to the pulpit on a brass plaque, to remind the preacher of the sacred calling of preaching: *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*

Now sometimes people will say, *“I come to church to be fed.”* I don’t know what restaurants you’re going to these days, but at the last two Carol and I visited, the chef came out and introduced himself to us. It’s a thing, I guess. But it reminded me that as much as I look to worship to feed my soul, **my** job is not to feed you. It’s to show you the menu and, if you haven’t met him, introduce you to the Head Chef.

So we would see Jesus. And this Jesus gives us an assignment: *“Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* Now I can’t say I hate my life – and Jesus, like many a good preacher, uses a little hyperbole here - but at nearly 70 years old I know more than ever that life is transitory. None of us knows how much time we have, so let’s make the most of it with a renewed commitment to serve Jesus Christ.

And you have even **before** the recent crisis. A Vision 2024 strategic plan. An application for an evangelism initiative, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of love. Helping Hands. And many more I’ve yet to learn.

I’m old enough to remember the 1967 hit by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. If you’re not familiar, find it on YouTube. It may have been a romantic love song, but it applies to the love of God as well. The chorus is what I’m talking about. Can’t you hear Jesus saying to us:

“If you feel like giving me a lifetime of devotion, I second that emotion.”

You see, while I said that life is transitory, I didn’t say I’m just waiting for heaven. Heaven – perfect union with God – is not something that comes after this life only, even though we hope for it in faith and even though the scriptures are filled with promises of it. Heaven is something we anticipate experiencing in **this** life. Woodbury Church has a saying, right? *“Love spoken here.”* It doesn’t get more “Methodist” than that. Facing challenges in his own day, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote, *“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.”* No wonder his brother Charles wrote the words we sang in our opening hymn:

*“In Christ, your head, you then shall know, shall feel your sins forgiven;
Anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven.”*

So we continue to become a community of love. We are being perfected in love. And we are to share that love, that good news, with others. By the way, note how that love was shared when the Greeks asked to see Jesus. Philip didn't try to do this alone. He went and told Andrew, the same Andrew that led his brother Peter to Jesus. And Philip and Andrew went together to Jesus. That's how evangelism works. That's why Jesus sent the disciples in pairs.

Now for those of us whose evangelism witness is quiet, who are not so much about shouting and dancing – although from time to time I'll get fired up and shout a bit – there are the words of the prophet Jeremiah today. He makes it clear that our witness is not about saying to others “Know the Lord” but that the love of the Lord will be written on our hearts and we shall all know him. Is it aspirational? Yes. *“The days are coming”* Jeremiah says. They're not here yet. But why not aspire? As the English poet Robert Browning wrote:

*“Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?”*

Or in the words of Jamie Hulley, a young woman who died an early death from an incurable disease but whose foundation has inspired tens of thousands of students in theatre and the performing arts:

“What would I want with small dreams?”

And lest anyone be thinking, *“Oh, this guy is a dreamer”* ...well, besides the fact that there are a lot worse things that one could say of anyone, this dreamer is not afraid of hard work. That's how dreams become reality. We roll up our sleeves and get to it. This kind of love is selfless love, love of others before self, *agape* in New Testament Greek. It is the love that is of God because it seeks the best in us and stands up to the worst among us.

Show of hands: how many of you have heard of Habitat for Humanity? Right: Habitat has built clean, affordable housing for 59 million people in 70 countries since its founding in 1976. Fun fact: since 2007, the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree is donated to Habitat, and the wood milled from it is used to build Habitat homes.

Tougher question: where did Habitat come from? It came from the experience of Millard Fuller, who was part of the Koinonia Farm, a multi-racial communal farm in Georgia started in 1942 in the segregated southern U.S. “Koinonia” is the Greek word for “community,” and its founders, Clarence and

Florence Jordan, envisioned a community where everyone was equal and race was no barrier, in a time and place where neither of these dreams were true. Clarence Jordan was a New Testament scholar and, among other works, wrote "A Cotton Patch Gospel." Florence Jordan grew up in Kentucky and learned of Jesus in Sunday School. Together they founded Koinonia Farm as a place where Jesus' way of love might be truly lived, rather than just be talked about.

The Jordans also joined the local Baptist church and served there without incident for many years. But then one Sunday, at a business meeting called after worship, the Jordans were accused of bringing a Black person to the segregated church. The moderator called for a vote to remove them from the church. After an awkward silence, the motion was seconded. By Florence Jordan. If fellowship across race lines was forbidden, she was guilty as charged. They were kicked out of the church but followed the way of love. Millard Fuller joined that way of love and the rest, as they say, is history.

What will those who come after us look on and say, "*The rest, as they say, is history?*"

If you feel like giving Jesus a lifetime of devotion, I second that emotion.

If "love spoken here" means "everyone, no exceptions," I second **that** motion.

Aspirational? You bet! Who better to follow than the Lord of Love?
Amen.