

"No Mystery Here"

Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Parts of the Bible are inescapably clear. We heard them today. Praise the Lord; in particular, praise the Lord for God's universal glory. Death is not the end. Love one another. To encounter these truths is to find "no mystery here."

No mystery here. It seems an odd thing to say in church. There is so much about God, and faith, and the practice of religion that is mysterious. Science and religion have at times agreed, but often argued, about how to understand life. From Copernicus to genetic engineering to animal cloning, there is challenge and mystery. Even within religion there is much that confuses. Little things like "Why do we have two candles on the altar?" (to symbolize Christ's divinity and humanity) to big things like "Why do innocent people suffer?"

Last week I mentioned that the book of Revelation is mysterious to us in many ways. It speaks in code language and we've lost the key to the code. Yet the vision expressed in Revelation's verses this morning is the longing of everyone who has faced the death of a loved one:

 "...the home of God is among mortals...God...
 will be with them...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and
 pain will be no more...To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the
 spring of the water of life."

(Revelation 21:3b,c; 4b, 6b)

What we eventually come to understand is that life is about loving one another and faith is about trusting God who holds our lives from beginning to ending and joy is about praising God. In that sense, faith and religion are the simplest things in the world.

They are also among the hardest. To love our neighbor, to trust and praise God is to be willing to change. It is said that change is certain, except from a vending machine. But many of us don't like it. Never mind that it was Jesus himself who said so. If today's Gospel sounded familiar to some, it was to those who read it during the week in the Upper Room

Disciplines devotional book or who were with us 31 days ago when we read this same passage on Maundy Thursday. On the very night of his betrayal Jesus said, “A **new** commandment I give you that you love one another.”

Yet what was new about that? Don’t the Hebrew Scriptures, the scriptures Jesus and the disciples knew, command the very same thing? Yes, they do. So what was new about this commandment? Look at the fine print in verse 34, something that Chris Shay pointed out in his Lenten devotional on this scripture. It is Jesus saying “*Just as I have loved you...*” As Phil Rizzuto, the great Yankee shortstop turned sports announcer used to say “Holy cow!” Just when we think we might be getting a handle on this love thing, learning how to love folks who think, act, look and value things differently from us, then Jesus says we are to love each other with *his* love. Impossible? Yet there it is. Inescapably clear. No mystery here. Love with the love of Jesus Christ. A new commandment. Change.

In last week’s message you heard some passages from our United Methodist Book of Discipline that advocated on behalf of others, and advocated for a church that was welcoming to all. If you missed it, the service recording and the manuscript are on the website, and I’m happy to send the latter to folks who, like me, are a bit technology adverse. The point is that advocacy often means change, and change sometimes upsets people. Yet I consistently find that such advocacy is born out of love, a love that yearns for a time when we see one another as spiritual siblings, children of a Divine Parent.

Still, maybe that’s also the problem. Our human loves—mother, father, aunt, uncle, and spouse—teach us about love, and we learn to practice that loving by loving back. Problem is, these human relationships can be complex and sometimes even downright dysfunctional. This is one of the reasons I don’t often use the word “family” to describe the church: for many people the metaphor of “family” carries too much negativity from one’s family of origin. Eric Burke tells of an illuminating moment in his prison ministry to youth offenders. He was asked by a young man “What is God like?” Responding with an orthodox answer, Burke said, “God is like a father.” The young man nearly spat out his reply, “Man, if God is like my father I sure would hate him.”

Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of our time, suggests this antidote in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

*“What if love is the way God **acts** toward the world and the way Jesus **acts** toward his disciples? In that sense we are talking about telling the truth, being faithful in sharing the word of God, continuing to **act** for those who may not be responsive, and, if need be, giving away one’s life. If this is love, then the world of Jesus here moves us out of naming our feelings and tinkering with our psyches and into speaking and **doing for one another.**”*

Craddock, Fred, John, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 107 (emphasis mine)

Sounds a bit like a mission to Ecuador, don’t you think? And we’ve already agreed that many of us are part of that mission, with in-kind and financial gifts and prayer, as well as those actually in Ecuador at this moment. It’s sacrificial. For Jesus, it was sacrificial even to the hour of his death.

By now there may be a few folks thinking or feeling, *“Well, pastor, I can’t be like Jesus and I’ve got troubles of my own and I come to church for solace and I don’t want to be made to feel guilty and I’m not comfortable with people different from me. I might speak and do for others but it’ll mostly be for people I know in places where I’m known because I just don’t have the gift you’re talking about.”*

Uh-huh.

Two thoughts in response: first, if we don’t stand up for what we believe and the values we espouse, who will? A member of a church where I was formerly pastor returned to college in mid-life and took a class on personal finance. The class was developing a monthly budget, and the church member noticed there was no category for charitable giving. She pointed that out and the class, comprised mostly of 20-somethings, responded with incredulity and ridicule. Why would you want to give away money to others, especially others you don’t know? Yet Christians say that one of the ways we show our fidelity to God is by how we handle our material resources. Jesus talked more about money and possessions than about faith. In this and many other areas, we often find the world

unsympathetic to our values and message. So unless we speak and act, no one will. No mystery here.

The second thought is to hear again the promise of Revelation. God declares, "See, I am making all things new..." The very change we fear is described as a promise: God lives among us, comforts us and defeats death and sorrow. These things pass away. God makes all things new.

With that assurance, we can embrace the future because it is God's future. We can go headlong into whatever new place God has in store for us. As individuals and as a congregation we can swing into the future knowing God is already there. With courage to move in a new direction, amazing results can happen. No mystery here.

Look, we know this, right? In our bulletin today, and every Sunday, is a reminder that we have a vision. It started in 2023, gelled into VISION 2024 and was updated this past January to VISION 2025. Evangelism, Missions, Communications, Affirmation and Inclusion, Youth and Young Adults, and Congregational Vitality and Growth in the areas of Spiritual Wellness, Financial Health and Inviting Facilities are all ministry areas to which we aspire. These foci are bearing fruit. Worship attendance averages 50 so far this year, compared to 38 a year ago. We have new members in the church and visitors every Sunday. Every Sunday. Ministry teams have new people participating. People who had stopped coming to worship have decided to attend regularly. New ministries have begun, including today's "*Testimony*" lay witness and "*Ask the Pastor*" event for young adults. Established ministries, like "*Helping Hands*" and "*Transition Academy*," have a new infusion of spiritual energy. Few, if any, of us could have imagined this level of vitality 15 months ago. Yet together we have learned to trust God and one another and take risks worthy of God.

And now? What new thing is God bidding us to do? What new future has God set forth into which we are to dance? Whatever that mysterious future may be, there is no mystery here in how we are to embrace it: with the love of Jesus for each other and the world; with the assurance that God awaits us there; and with joy as we declare with the Psalmist: "Praise the Lord."