

Sermon for November 10, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Exodus 20:18-21, Acts 18:24-28

“The Church’s One Foundation”

A few month’s ago some of your elders and I went to a Presbytery meeting at Wayside Presbyterian Church. They are taking church security to a whole new level. They have crosses in their sanctuary that are velcroed on the walls which can be used as clubs if things go awry. I picked one up and it was a pretty impressive instrument, it felt good in my hand. I wondered what would happen if when my dad was preaching the Sunday after he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma and someone threw a hymnal at him while he was preaching, if that person had a cross to throw at him instead.

We began this week our security door protocol, which seems a much more innocuous beginning than maces and clubs in the sanctuary. It is a simple door but in my e-news a few weeks back I went over the significance or the image of the door in the Bible and how it is used in Scripture. If it is open then it is inviting, if it is closed and locked then it sends a very different message. It has gone smoothly so far. This Sunday is our first Sunday with it so give us feedback and let us know how it is working.

The fear of the unknown can cause us to make decisions based on what-ifs that may never happen. We can create scenarios in our minds that are horrific and so think that crosses as clubs is just what you have to do these days, because of the times in which we live, so we can feel like we really don’t have a choice. It is just what we have to do. But it is not something you have to do, it is something you decide to do based upon your perspective on what really keeps people safe. It is exponentially safer to be here in church than it is to drive your child to school or putting them on the school bus. But we take them to school or place them on the school bus, not because we don’t care about our kids, but we subconsciously weigh the cost and the benefit.

In both of our Old and New Testament Scriptures we find addressed a fundamental approach to our faith which is based on either grace or fear. Upon which of these we lay our foundation in our relationship with God will dictate much in regards to our world view. Let’s see if we can draw a relevant line.

READ SCRIPTURE

Every week I meet with the preschool pre-k class on Fridays. During that time we sing songs, we tell Bible stories, we learn the 10 commandments, we pray together. It is interesting how these commandments remain a foundation for teaching and even for some, the nature of our

relationship with God. Today, this Old Testament Scripture in Exodus takes place immediately after God had given to Moses the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai and the people had seen it all play out and decided in these verses that it is a good thing that Moses was there to go up into the dark cloud and the thunder and the lightning because they wanted nothing to do with it.

But Moses says if you are going to do a cost-benefit analysis then think of the benefit of being able to be in the presence of the Lord. Come and approach the Lord your God, come on up the mountain, God wants to be in relationship with you. He was just testing you to see if you wanted to be with Him. And the people respond, yes, you are right, but the cost isn't worth it because God will strike us down, that is what God does after all.

If you look at vs.20 Moses tries to talk them into a personal relationship with God and he says, God is just trying to test you by putting the fear of God into you to see how you will react. You've heard that phrase before, right? Here Moses is trying to encourage the people to approach God in light of the fear that they had of God. There is a fundamental difference in how we base our relationship with God. Is it based upon your perspective of God being a God of judgment and you obey that God out of fear of being punished. This is what we have set up in our first Scripture. It is the fear of God that ought to give you the trust in God to approach him.

Fear creates actions based on hypothetical what ifs and your mind inevitably takes you to a place where only the worst can happen and you have to be prepared for that. But what we find in our New Testament reading and in the coming of Jesus is that our faith no longer has to be built upon the worst case scenario but rather upon a God of love and grace who allows you to approach his throne not out of fear, but out of gratitude, out of love, out of the expectations that God will treat you with grace and the worst case scenario will never materialize.

When our foundation, and thus the church's foundation, is based upon the person of Jesus and all the grace and mercy and forgiveness that he has to offer then no longer are we compelled to act or make decisions out of fear.

This takes us to Acts 18. We find ourselves in another city in Asia Minor what is today modern day Turkey. We find ourselves in Ephesus. A city where Paul founded a church and wrote a letter to it called Ephesians, the letter to the Ephesians. It is a city that will keep popping up in Acts, Paul shows up there soon and gets kicked out of there soon as well. Stacy and I were able to see the churches of Revelation, we went to that area of the world. It was an incredible trip and we saw Ephesus which was my favorite location. John the Gospel writer, who happens to be my favorite, made Ephesus his home. We saw the church where he was supposedly buried and I was surprised that I felt somewhat emotional while I was there.

Today we find Apollos who is a Greek Jew from Alexandria in Ephesus and he is a great preacher, people love him and he is convincing and a tremendous asset to the kingdom of God. He is someone who is fired up for what is happening in the church and wants people to be a part of this movement, but he doesn't really understand who Jesus is. He was baptized by John which meant he understood the message the Messiah is going to come and so we have to repent and be read, or else. He didn't understand that Jesus had already come and that Jesus was the Messiah, and so salvation had already come and this salvation was given freely to all of humanity. His understanding of the Gospel was stunted and only partial and based upon fear and the what if the Messiah comes and we aren't ready, then condemnation will be our result.

He was a good guy, his heart was in the right place, but he just didn't understand who Jesus really was. He knew about Jesus, and could tell people about Jesus, but he really didn't know him personally. A few times he appears in Paul's writings as someone who had brought a lot of people into the kingdom of God and into the church and he calls him a servant of the Lord.

Priscilla and Aquilla take him aside and teach him about the foundation of the church. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. If you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus, if Jesus isn't someone that you love, with whom you communicate and commune, if he is just a name and a concept to you, then you need to go deeper. There is a danger in main stream churches as ours that not much is expected of you. You may never know the full impact of what a relationship with Jesus can mean and can have in your life because we are following our head and just trying to be good people.

That is not what is required of us, just to be good people. Look at vs. 27 and we see the grace of God which has entered his teachings as a result of Aquila and Priscilla's words. If you live your life just trying to be good then probably you see God as someone who will punish you if you don't behave. That is not who we are as Protestants. Our goal is not to live good lives. Our goal is to love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart and strength. This will then propel you to good works of gratitude as a result. The foundation of our faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is what each of us needs.

Gandhi once said that he loved Jesus and loved his teachings but it was Christians who steered him clear of identifying with the faith. Christians who live out of fear will interact with people out of fear and suspicion. We can know who Jesus is but not have a personal relationship with him. I don't want anyone to ever say about this church that they sure do a lot in the community. They sure do love people and welcome them. But I spent years going there and

never heard that I needed to have a personal relationship with Jesus and that salvation is found in Christ alone.

Listen to me now. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord and if you do not know Jesus personally then you cannot serve him as you ought. You will not reap the benefits of salvation which includes eternal life and loving your neighbor as you ought. You have to love him and know him, not just know about him.

You can grow up in the church fearing God. We can grow up in the church, get married in the church, raise our families in the church, but still not have a personal relationship with him. If we are upset because someone took our pew then we have no understanding of what it means to love Jesus. Our love is found elsewhere.

Apollos was a good guy, taught people about Jesus, but that was only part of the story. Was Jesus a great prophet, yes! Was Jesus a great teacher, yes! Even Lord whose life we ought we ought to emulate, yes! But did we know he is creator of heaven and earth? God immortal, the one who appeared to Moses on the mountain and rescued the adulterous woman? The Jesus who reaches out and lift you out of the hole in which you find yourself.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ and just as Moses tells the people of Israel, draw near, do not be afraid, for in Christ there is life and there is love and perfect love, as found in Christ, casts out all fear. Amen.