

Calvary United Methodist Church
July 29, 2018

DEFINING VALUES
Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

If the kids would come forward I am about to spend a little bit of time with our kids today. This is one of my favorite times. Come up around me here. Come on up. (Child speaks.) Well, I'm going to show you. You want to come up here? If you come closer, well, these I'll give to you later on, but come on up a little closer.

What is your first name? Come up and help me. I promise I don't bite, really. I'm pretty good. I've gotten tamed.

Ok. Well, I was looking at these M&Ms and I wondered, do you like M&Ms? You don't have chocolate allergies, right? Anyone have chocolate allergy? We're good? Ok. So, I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to see if they are the same color on the inside as they are on the outside, right? You don't think so? Would you try this one? This is a blue one. Try it. Does it taste blue? Ok. (Child speaks.) Your mom can't eat chocolate? And you have to do it for her, don't you, because you are just that kind of a guy. You are gracious. (Child speaks.) Oh, ok. Now, I have a knife, and you know not to play with knives unless your parents are around, right? And if you don't pay attention you get cut and I did the other day, so did it taste blue inside? What did it taste like? Chocolate inside? So this is blue. It is chocolate inside.

How about a red one? Does it taste like red? What do you think? Tastes the same. Alright, let's check. This is always good, to do a scientific test to see if it's red inside. No, it's chocolate.

How about yellow? See if that tastes like yellow. Are you enjoying being my assistant? I was going to ask Pastor Jeff to do it, but he can just suck it up. Ok. It's not yellow either.

How about...see if that tastes like green. What does green taste like? It tastes like chocolate. Do you think it's green inside? Think it's chocolate? (Child speaks.) Does it really? Well, that one is green too. Want to see it? But it's chocolate inside.

How about I just give you a whole bunch and you can munch on them here while I talk to you? You have to get close. Come on up. There you go. Come a little closer. Ok?

Now, these M&Ms can tell us something important that we need to know about how we are made, that we come in lots of colors and shapes and sizes, kinds of hair and all kinds of other stuff, alright? I have to share, that's really important. Ok? So, I have to pass them around here. Now, not too many now. There you go, did you get some? Take some there.

Now, people come red and yellow, black, brown and white and on the inside God looks at them and loves them because we're all the same, just like the M&Ms. God loves us alike. There is no one that God doesn't love, even on your worst day. Some days I get cranky. You can't believe it, right? My wife will tell you. You can get cranky. You guys are kind of out here on the edge here. You are ok with chocolate? Shall we save a few for Pastor Jeff? Hey, you have a fan here, Jeff. This is good.

It doesn't matter to God what is on the outside. God looks on the inside. That's where all the good stuff is. And we sing a song about that. Let's see, does anybody remember that song? These people will help us, right, because they will sing it. Sing it today.

Jesus loves the little children.
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white.
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Good job. God looks at you with incredible love. He made you, He loves you. But sometimes when we look at other people, we don't love them. We don't take the time to see that God's handiwork is in them, that each person is special. So when you look at another person, you can sing the song: red, yellow, black, brown and white, they are precious in his sight, and you can look at the people even the kids who sit next to you. What grade are you going into? Fifth grade. So there is going to be some boy sitting next to you in fifth grade, oh, a boy, but God loves him too.

Let's pray: Lord, thank you for our kids and thank you for this amazing message that you love us all just as we are. You love us so much as to create so many different kinds and on the inside we are all alike. So bless our kids and help us to live before them that they grow up to be kids who love people because you made them blessed.

Message:

Ephesians 2:11-22

I want to welcome Tom and Pat Shoffler who were from my former congregation, so thank you for being here with us this morning. And they are moving south very shortly.

Would you join me now in a word of prayer: So, Lord, as we look into this work, give us the receptivity to receive it from your hand and your heart. I as that You would guide me too, that You would use my words, give us an open heart, an open mind and faith in You to trust You for this Word in the name of Christ. Amen.

Many years ago, in the early 1980s, Billy Graham came to Baltimore. Anyone go there, go hear Billy Graham in Baltimore? It was about 1981 or 82. I was living in Shrewsbury, and I was serving as an associate pastor at a church there. Of course we were going to go hear Billy

Graham. We had an old rickety church bus and we loaded it up and we headed down I-83. We hadn't gone but about 10 miles when we saw a church van pulled off to the side.

Now, I knew the pastor and I knew the church. They were a fundamentalist. They were looking into the engine compartment. There was something wrong there. And the bus driver pulled right over. Okay, so we got out and I talked to the pastor a little tentatively. I knew that he had been hostile in times past and I knew that he looked down upon us and I could see that the folks in the van were somewhat bothered by their circumstance. One of our folks came off the bus and said: "We have plenty of room. Everybody get in the bus, we'll all go down and hear Billy Graham." And before the pastor could say a word, they said, "Yes!" and they were jumping into the bus. And you know, we had the best time! We really did! And we even stopped after the rally at a restaurant, had a meal together. When we arrived in Shrewsbury, their van was fixed and waiting for them. But most importantly, we broke down a dividing wall. And on that Church bus God's Spirit helped us convert hostility to hospitality.

I would hope something like that could happen again today; but you and I know this is a different day, and we haven't seen such division, where people are fearful, anxious and of course divided. And I recognize that the culture from the 1980s has changed very dramatically. Of course, Sept 11th of 2001 brought on a huge cultural change. We moved from trust and neighborliness to fear. And don't forget, a lot of people make money on your fears and they keep that coming because of the money. But the shame of it is that we have now made that fear something that everyone just believes. And it has erected more walls between people and even the church now has allowed that in many places to become quite politicized.

So, it is difficult for Christians of other traditions to talk with one another to find common ground. Humanism now seems to be something from a long past day. It's hard even for Christians in one church to be civil to Christians from another church. How strange it is that people who believe Jesus came to break down the walls, actually erected more walls and that between one another, especially since our value is not division but unity in Christ.

Well, in the days we call Old Testament, the people of God had erected walls to keep out everyone and anyone who was not a believer and convert. And they instituted severe penalties including death if you crossed those boundaries. They had the court of the Gentiles and the poor women, you just didn't go past that stuff. And I've been there and seen some of that. And then along comes Jesus who breaks all of those rules, tears down all those barriers, meets with anyone and everyone who will meet with him. It says Jesus ate with sinners. You know why Jesus ate with sinners? Because that's the only kind of people there are. That's the truth. And he ended up offending everybody. And so what they did was simply, let's do away with him. So they conspired to kill him.

But here is where you meet the heart of the Gospel: God intervenes and reverses the human sentence of crucifying Jesus. And God raised him from the dead. The first thing Jesus did on that resurrection night was to bring together his friends—every one of whom had disappointed

him, left him, sold him out. And what he did was, he forgave them. Then he called to afresh and to receive his Spirit and to walk in a new of being. To be changed by God's love so as to reflect God's love. And so they followed; and they changed the world. And they brought it down all the way to us. And only as we are faithful will it go down to people beyond us in the centuries to come.

So, Jesus taught us that a defining value is forgiveness, that in him we become a new creation. So, that's really helpful to us. We don't have to waste our time pointing fingers at people or looking at their faults, or trying to correct them. Instead we can look for ways to reconcile, look for ways that we can bring new life where there is only death and a dying world. We can bring hope where there is fear. And the point of this faith is NOT to escape this life and go off onto a little religious quest and forget its problems; it IS to embrace those very problems and to bring the healing of Christ into situations and lives living in darkness, and difficulty or evil or even in death. And the best place to begin to practice this is the Church.

Don't think I don't know how difficult this is. After nearly 4 decades of ministry, as the commercial says, I know a thing or two because I've seen a thing or two. That forgiveness, trust, reconciliation, these are difficult. If they were easy, we would do it. We need God's help to do it. But we are called to this. And Jesus promises to help us do it.

The late teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock was a west Tennessee boy who go himself a pretty good education and made good, but he always went back to his hometown in west Tennessee around Christmastime. He visited his family and friends and he had an old buddy who had a restaurant there called Bucks. He had a little café on the main street and it was a popular place and Fred went there and visited Buck, he'd always give him a cup of coffee and a piece of chess pie. Now, you have to talk to someone who is southern to find out what chess pie is, but you ask. So he gets there and meets Buck, give him a warm handshake and he says, "Come on, let's go someplace to get a cup of coffee."

And Fred says, "Isn't this a restaurant?"

"Well, if you want to call it that," Buck said. "It's kind of a restaurant."

He said, "What's the problem? Buck points to a curtain that divided the place. It divided the patrons on the white side and the black side. He said, "Do you see the curtain?"

Fred said, "Buck, I see this curtain every time I come here. I know what it means... I know that white folks come in the front door and black folks have to come in from an alley behind the cafe."

Buck looked up and said, "Fred, that curtain has got to come down."

"Good," he said. "Pull her down!"

"That's easy for you to say," said Buck. "You come in once a year and tell me how to run my business."

"Then leave it up," Fred said.

Well, the man is in personal agony. He said, "Fred, I take that curtain down, and I lose my customers; I leave that curtain up, and I lose my soul!"

Sometimes reconciliation is difficult. I know that. But why don't you tell me what is most important to Jesus.

It takes courage to live as a Christian life in today's climate of fear, suspicion and in some places outright hate and hostility, and that by many Christians! But that is what we are called to do. That is what we heard in the scriptures today from Ephesians, that for the love of Christ and to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to tear down those barriers. Those are our defining values.

I hope that you receive this is the spirit of grace. I am here for these purposes. I am not here just to mind the store for a couple of years. I am aware that you have some issues in the congregation. I'm aware that you have some unresolved disagreements in the body of Christ and they lie just beneath the surface. And I know that such things will stay below the surface until sometime they find opportunity and they'll come up, and they will, they will. But if you and I have the courage to address them in fairness, patience and love, then I believe God's Spirit will help us to resolve them. And if we can do that, then you can grow in the love and grace of Christ where you have never grown before. Now, this takes forbearance, it takes honesty, it takes patience. And I am with that guy who had a sign over his desk that said: Lord, give me patience and give it to me now. I wish the path was easier than that; but forbearance, honesty, patience is the best path.

I know that we human beings are naturally inclined to foster hostility and division, it's what we do. We do that rather than peace, and we get our back up. But, you know, we can be realistic about this. We can be realistic about the task and the process. And, since it is completely the will of Jesus that his people love one another and live in peace with one another, for he said, "...by this will all know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another..." then that's where we begin, with love and respect for one another.

We don't have to agree with everyone and you don't have to be somebody's doormat. You don't have to just lay down and let people walk over you, that's true. But what you can do is try to understand the other person with respect for their dignity and their opinion, and to know that there are many sides and many points of view in a room full of people where you would have these kinds of conversations. Since Jesus is our peace, then we make sure that he is fully centered in our business and dialogue together. And I do believe that God's Spirit is eager for this and waits for us to invite God's help, because God does desire your unity and peace.

He wants to break down those walls that divide, eliminate the hostility that lies under the surface. The cross of Christ, you see, helps us put to death the anger and violence and bitterness to others in our heart. I am ashamed to say that I hold that in some places. I'm just like you. I have my own struggles. I have people that when I think about I don't always have kind thoughts. Maybe that's not you and maybe I'm just giving confession here, but I think it's all of us. But the Spirit of Christ helps us to go beyond that. And Jesus wants to break down those walls that divide and he wants for us to move forward because he has a destiny for you. We are not just here this morning because it's such a wonderful place. We are here because it is a mission and a destiny that we are called to.

So, being able to hear one another, to kind of calm our own selves, be forbearing, be patient, means that we accept one another in the Body of Christ. And we can create a climate of honesty and of patient forbearance. And when we do this, the divisions will end, the walls and curtains that divide come down because they will not be necessary. There will be a culture of trust. And then, the result is that Church moves forward. And "forward" is all about the mission of Jesus in this fractured, dangerous and divided world. And there are people all around you whose names you don't know, but God does and waits for us to have something to offer, something in love and in grace. But if we choose to maintain our divisions, if we choose to hold on to those spirits of hostility, God's Spirit really can't work with us and won't. God will find someone else, because God will always find a way. Such churches exist and they go backwards. And as you know that is happening to churches all around us. So, let me ask you this: Is this what you want for your church?

Let me read again from Ephesians just a few of those verses so that we have them in our hearts and minds. Let Paul speak to us by the power of the Spirit:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ for he himself is our peace who made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in his flesh the law and his commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two thus making peace and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God's through the cross by which he came, by which he put death to their hostility.

And then it says in verse 21: In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to the Lord and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

Would you join me in prayer? Lord, you know us, you see us, and you love us in ways that we could not even begin to imagine. Help us to take your love so seriously as to love one another, to find ways to heal, to listen, to move forward and as we do, Lord, move us into that destiny that you call us to. In Christ. Amen.

Benediction:

Somewhere in 1953, a group of people got together and decided this would be a good place to launch a church and since then you have all been here. Some have come and gone and others have come and you are here. You have a destiny. God doesn't just have you here because, "Well this is nice." I'm not here because, "Well, this is great." I'm here because we have a mission and we have a destiny, but it is up to us to cooperate with the Spirit of God to meet that. A lot of churches will fail in the next twenty years. Anyone at the conference level understands that very well and they are seeing it because some will not meet it, some have no resources to meet it and there are probably other reasons too. But you are gifted. You are blessed and graced. All we have to do is forbear with the love of Christ, trust him. The way he multiplied the fish and loaves you think he can't do that?

May the love of God and the fellowship of Jesus and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.