

Rev. Brian Merritt  
October 8, 2017  
“Losing Control”  
Matthew 21:33-46

## **You Don't Know What You Had until It is Gone**

What does it mean to lose something that once held certainty? What does it mean to have certainty become as elusive as sand falling through the hour glass? What happens when we thought we had our ticket punched and are left searching our pockets, our bags with the porter waiting impatiently for us to show that we belong on this train?

We see this every day with the shift in our culture and the sociological makeup of our communities. We watch it in our families as our children grow up, move away and turn their thoughts to their own new families. We watch it when our parents need to quit driving and their sharp memories become faded. It can be when we watch that one we dearly love succumb to the self-destruction of addiction or trying to make sense of the misfiring chemicals in their brains when they have another round with their mental illness. We see it in our health and memories as the doctor's appointments pile up as much as the prescriptions. We watch it when our church disappoints us and we watch what was important to our faith change in new generations.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, if you come to church to find, “a faith you will not encounter pain, doubt or disappointment” then you might want to pick up your bulletin and start thinking about lunch. The great North African theologian Augustine had it exactly correct when he described the church as a hospital ward for the sinner.

We come here to celebrate the good news of grace in Jesus Christ, but we also come here to mourn, lay down our fears, cry and carry our crosses. Sometimes, even here, we find out that we are the wicked tenants, whispering amongst ourselves after the murder of someone else's reputation, Jesus surely will lease this vineyard to other tenants who will give him produce at harvest time!

## **The Unacceptable Truth**

There is an unacceptable truth of faith in the community of Christ. That truth is that we do not get to choose the type, extent or the nature of the person whom the love of grace is extended amongst the friends of Jesus. As a matter of fact, we are sent the constantly beguiling message that the weak one, the one who is on the lowest rung, or the one that is the most embarrassing is the one we should elevate as the most important.

We do not get to determine salvation, partially because we make such terribly divinities. As a god, we would be too capricious, controlling and power hungry. I have often said that if I was god, no one would make it into my heaven. I can't live up to my own expectations of myself, how would you? Surrendering to God is surrendering our ego, or the lack thereof. The unacceptable truth is that you don't get control over what or who is acceptable to God. It means that you need to stop condemning yourself, because surrendering to Christ's love means you are acceptable.

### **The Constant Act of Rediscovering Love**

When we think it is hopeless, when we are faced with mortality and all its unanswerable questions, when we are disappointed and disillusioned with the firm foundation, where are we left? We are given memory.

A little sidebar here, I said memory and not nostalgia. Biblical memory is to remind us of all the things that God has done for us, it reminds us of our position on this planet in humility and gives us the perspective of hope for the present and the future. Nostalgia is the phantom of history. It is a past that never really existed except in idealistic advertising. It glosses over problems and says that the past will always be better than the present or future. It may be based on truth, but it is an emotional connection to the past that only produces a feeling of loss. It keeps us from saying, "I am happy to be here despite everything."

This was reminded to me last week when I reread an interview of the amazing indigenous writer Sherman Alexie. He was explaining to Terry Gross waking up from his last brain surgery that diminished about 85% of his brain capacity. This was in answer to her question, "...were you happy to be alive?"

"You know, it's been, I guess, 19 months since surgery. And whenever I even ponder that question, as I'm pondering it now, I start to cry. Waking up after

surgery was - is the greatest moment of my life. And it made me realize despite all the trauma, despite all my past and current mental illnesses, despite any pain that I have, that my life as I've constructed, as it has been constructed around me and for me is something amazing. And I'm grateful for that. I am grateful to be an indigenous man married to an indigenous woman with indigenous children in 21st century United States. I am happy to be here despite everything. And that feeling has made me a slightly different person.”

When we look into the memory of faith and faithfulness that has been the response of Immanuel Presbyterian Church to the good news of Jesus Christ, it reminds us that we are given the divine opportunity to rediscover that verb love. It is the same verb that we must live here in and amongst each other, as well as, throughout our worlds.

### **Get Back to Work!**

So, here is where I tell you the cure for spiritual malaise. I give you a ten-point program for regaining purpose in your life. No. I won't insult your intelligence by making up some program for you that might make me look spiritual, but has dubious practicality. There is only one sure fired way that I know to bear the type of fruit that keeps us on track for the kingdom goal. Getting back to the work of love. Loving our neighbors, loving yourself, sharing your cloak, welcoming the little children, feeding the hungry, setting the captives free, laughing with those who laugh, crying with those who cry, being just, practicing mercy, welcoming the stranger and bringing hope into Nob Hill. Get to work! That's it. Thanks be to God and Thank God we are alive!