**SERMON Luke 23:50-56 [Matt 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; John 19:38-42]**

The Bible Story

I’ve always thought Joseph of Arimathea was a small player in a greater narrative. After Jesus’ execution, he’s the one who goes to Pilate and asks for the body. He wraps Jesus’ body in a linen shroud, and he places it in a tomb that he had already prepared. Joseph shows himself to be generous, compassionate, and kind, and not insignificantly, he shows Jesus the respect and dignity due every human being even in death. Still, I have always assumed that Joseph’s fleeting appearance so late in the story makes him little more than a literary device, a narrative link, designed to move the plot along to its culmination— the resurrection.

All four gospels, however, mention Joseph of Arimathea by name, so there must be something more to his character. The details are scant but significant. He is said to be rich, and in the gospel of Luke he is reported to be a respected member of the Jewish Council. By all accounts he appears to be a good citizen and person of faith, pious, and one who has achieved wealth and privilege in his life. He’s a part of the establishment; a conformist to the culture and politics of the day; a leader in the religious community; and consequently, a person with position, power, and influence. Matthew tells us that he was also “a disciple of Jesus” (27:57), Mark (15:43) (and Luke 23:51) emphasize his piety saying that he was “waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” But for all of that, John adds that Joseph - because of fear - followed Jesus only “in secret” (19:38).

Our Experience

This little detail caught my attention because I feel deeply that we often do a dis-service to one another when we oversimplify our faith. When we leave out the messy bits, the times in our lives when we are ashamed, frightened, or overwhelmed. When, despite all appearances of being put together and having all the answers, we are lost in a sea of questions. Questions that we’ve assumed everyone else has either figured out or had the sense never to ask in the first place. Well, Joseph of Arimathea, “The Face of Our Faith” this week deeply understands that faith can be complicated, sometimes your heart and your head are in different places. Sometimes your circumstances, your job, your position in the community, impact how you live out your faith rather than the other way around.

Perhaps he was reluctant to step outside his own comfort zone. Perhaps he was afraid of losing his position, power, and influence by declaring and acting upon the real inclinations of his heart — to say openly that he was in fact drawn deeply to this rabbi from Nazareth whose teachings about love awakened hearts, convicted consciences, disturbed the status quo, invited lasting personal and corporate transformation — a person whose very being seemed to embody and radiate the reality of which he spoke, this “kingdom” where divine love governed all and healed all who drew near to it.

The Bible

We know, as Mark and Luke tell us, that Joseph was someone who was “waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” For all his privilege, it sems that Joseph, was also dissatisfied, discontent, and disturbed by the ‘way things are.’ He appears to have been troubled by the politics, the culture, and the religion of his day that – not unlike ours - was so marked by conflict, division, and often violence. Joseph, for all his apparent accomplishment, was still looking for something more, something not just for himself maybe, but also for others. The kingdom of God was not some personal goal but a whole new world order. He was longing for a more transcendent vision for human life — a world filled with human beings being fully human, fully alive, fully radiating the divine image that is the very birthright of all who are called human. This was Joseph’s predicament, and one that many of us can relate to: he knew well the private longings of his heart, and he was afraid to make them publicly known. But, as he would come to discover, that is not freedom, and that is no way to live.

Only when reality set in, did Joseph move decisively. He witnessed the absolute injustice of the crucifixion. He saw firsthand the politics and maneuverings, the egos and the fear, that were unrelenting in their drive to destroy Jesus and all he stood for. He was convicted by seeing the real consequences of his own reluctance to speak up and act out for the one he knew to be fully compassionate, fully merciful, and fully just. It is as if Joseph of Arimathea, in that moment, actually came to his senses and realized that to be true to his deepest self, his true humanity, he could no longer afford to play it safe and keep himself “secretly” at a distance from the suffering he witnessed and the love for which he so longed.

Desmond Tutu puts it this way: “People are fundamentally good,” he writes. “The aberration (or deviation) is not the good person; the aberration is the bad person. We are made for goodness.” Joseph of Arimathea was made for goodness, but it wasn’t until being faced with the horrifying reality of Jesus’ crucifixion that he stepped into his own goodness.

Story of Le Chambon

There are so many stories from history of people and communities doing good, and often in secret before going public. The history of social movements in the United States is replete with examples. Many of know of those who fought for abolition and aided the Underground Railroad, harboring those fleeing slavery. The Mattachine Society of the 1950s, a precursor to the modern-day gay rights movement, which supported and provided community for LGBTQ+ people, keeping their identities secret to protect their safety. All over Europe, during the Second World War, people tried to secretly save Jews fleeing the horror of the holocaust. In Le Chambon, a village in southern France, the entire community became involved in the rescue, turning their tiny mountain village into a hiding place for Jews from every part of Europe. Between 1940 and 1944, this village and others nearby provided refuge for more than 5,000 people fleeing Nazi persecution. Magda Trocmé, the wife of the local minister André Trocmé, explained how it began saying:

“Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated…How could we refuse them?...We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, “How did you make a decision?” There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!”

In all these circumstances, there came a point where the suffering of another became so great, so obscene, so obviously the antithesis of everything we hoped for society and our part in it, that something had to be done to shift the trajectory from evil to good. Someone had to reach inside of ourselves and find courage in the face of fear.

Our Experience

If we who call ourselves human are actually hardwired for goodness, then naming what is right and true, doing what is just and good, living compassionately, exercising mercy, and giving ourselves over to the healing and well-being of all others is the only way to be truly human. It is not a burden to be carried but a joy to be experienced, not a draining obligation but an opportunity to live, not a duty to be endured but the way into perfect freedom.

We who are dissatisfied, discontent, and disturbed by the world around us today would do well to take our cues from Joseph of Arimathea. Taking Jesus’ cold, dead body in his arms and placing it in a tomb was not only a kind and compassionate gesture, it remains an iconic moment of resistance to evil. Of goodness in action.

The Bible

What did Joseph do? I want to suggest that he did at least 3 specific things, that abolitionists did, that the people of Le Chambon did, and that you and I can do. First, he recognized that what he was witnessing was an injustice. In our passages today…we heard of the conspiracy forged against Jesus, we hear Pilate’s response and later capitulation to the pressure of the mob, and we hear that Joseph “has not agreed to their plan and attention” (23:51). Maybe he had already voiced his concerned, maybe he had already spent hours arguing back and forth, drawing in scripture from the Torah and the Prophets, maybe he had offered alternative actions, and maybe he knew that this was bigger than him. We will never know. What we do know is that leaving Jesus’ body to be picked apart by the birds of prey wasn’t an option. That the injustice done to the living was not to be worsen now that Jesus was dead.

Application

There are many injustices of the past that we had no part in, no say in and no control to change. Racial injustices, gender disparities, discrimination on the bases of sexuality, nationality, economics and more all have deep historical roots. But past injustices don’t just stay in the past, they affect and *in*fect the present and the future – shaping the battles and the inequalities of today. You may not have been there at the beginning, but you are here now, will you take a cue from Joseph of Arimathea and recognize injustice for what it is, and do your part to alleviate any continuation of that suffering.

Second, although it may be easy to criticize Joseph for doing too little too late, after all he was not able to stop Jesus from being crucified, he did eventually step out of his own comfort zone to literally embrace the body of Jesus, even at great personal risk. He offered freely what he had, in the empty/unused tomb even as seemingly insignificant as it appeared in the face of such overwhelmingly opposing forces.

Application

Living out your faith – particularly in the areas of social justice and advocacy – almost always involves stepping outside the familiar. Moving beyond your comfort zone, embarking on a steep learning curve, getting stuff wrong and having to ask a hundred questions. But, I believe that even small acts of goodness can bring big changes…this is even more true in the community of the church, when the small acts of individuals joined together under one purpose to “love our neighbors,” to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God,” to “defend the cause of the widow, the orphan and the stranger,” are multiplied as we work together. And where goodness meets injustice there, we will experience a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Being a faithful follower of Jesus will mean that we need to adapt to the current needs of our community, needs that will change over time, we will need to keep our own egos in check knowing that programs and efforts that we established all ago and for good reason may need to change as well. Faithful discipleship may mean that we – like Joseph – are called to summon a courage that we didn’t know we had!

Third, Joseph of Arimathea trusted in the love of Jesus and in the loving kingdom to which he was so deeply drawn, and he chose to follow that small persistent voice inside him that said, “it doesn’t have to be this way,” “there’s a role for you to play here,” “you can still bring honor and dignity, where it has been stripped away,” “acts of goodness are never insignificant!” And rather can be complicit in the murder of Jesus, Joseph became instead an instrument of compassion and love…ultimately, he ended up embodying the divine image he ended up carrying.

Conclusion

This is nothing more, or less, than our own life’s work — than to: embody and radiate the divine image. Nothing else counts the injustice of a broken world embroiled in conflict and distrust. Embody and radiate the divine image in ways that makes sense for the needs of our city and community today, in meaningful and sensitive ways that bring dignity and worth to all human beings, in ways that alleviates suffering and elevates compassion and hope for the future. Embody and radiate the divine image that showed us an other-worldly, kind of love, that was and remains the birthright of every human being.

You may have heard before the advice of theologian Karl Barth that he gave to clergy but is applicable to all followers of Jesus. A Christian must live their faith with “the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” He was saying that having an eye on current events, the state of our modern world, and the plight of our neighbor, while wrestling with what the Bible says about both love and hate is exactly how the Christian in our time can embody and radiate the divine image, and usher that new world order, that new creation that is the Kingdom of God into our present time. The actions of Joseph of Arimathea, though only recorded in a handful of verses, though only small in the grand scheme of things, and perhaps too late to make any seismic shift in the political arena of the Roman Empire, merited his name being preserved in our scriptures. And as such, present for us in 2021 an example of a more complicated, realistic life of faith. May we be so bold as to embody and radiate the divine image in our day. Amen.