

April 2024

Rev. Dr. Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

April 7

Text: Luke 24:36-49 "Power to Witness"

The risen Christ told the amazed disciples that they were to be witnesses of His death and resurrection. This witnessing would proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all people (Luke 24:46-48). The word used for "witnesses" (v. 48) is *μάρτυρ*. It is the word used for those who will testify in court as to what they have witnessed. It is also a word that is sometimes used to describe a martyr. (The disciples must have wondered, "Is this what I signed up for?")

Let us look at our own place before the risen Christ. We, too, are called to be witnesses. What shall we say that we have seen? Do our lives match the words we use when we give witness? What would it mean to be a martyr in today's American culture?

Jesus promises the disciples (and us) the power to do these things (Luke 24:49). Take note of two Greek words for power (both used in the New Testament) and take note of which one is used here. One word means power by privilege and position. The other word means power by abundance and miracle. Yes! Our power is abundantly given as a miraculous gift from God.

As Luke tells the story, the disciples are to start right where they are (Jerusalem) (Luke 24:33, 49). My temptation is to wait for the perfect opportunity - always sometime in the future - before I make a conscious witness for Jesus. Our Lord wants me to start right where I am, among the people I know now, in my community where now I see homeless and needy, in my attitude toward folks different from me, in personal financial decisions, uh oh! This is getting real!

Some years ago, I was in a small town in Jamaica, part of a work team that was building a church building in that community. Digging. Laying bricks. Hauling Trash. More digging. It took two more work teams after us to complete the project. A couple of years after that, an overwhelming hurricane poured through Jamaica. It was devastating to all the houses in town. It tore up the small business district. In fact, we got the word that the only safe building in the entire town was that church building. In building it, we had no idea if it was more than a simple place of worship. It ended up saving lives in more ways than one. Witnessing is like that. God is able to use it far beyond what our ordinary days can see. Thanks be to God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Theodore Jennings, Jr., has written (*Good News to the Poor*, Abingdon): "A grace that allegedly saves my soul while leaving the concrete and visible relations of my life unaffected is merely illusory."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You came that I might see You, Lord Jesus. I go now to tell others..."

April 14

Text: Mark 12:28-34 "Finding Commonalities; Orienting Mission: The Golden Rule for All"

Truth to tell, for a long time I sat in front of my computer, trying to think of something to say about this familiar text. Love God. Love neighbor. What else can be said? So, I decided to go into town and get lunch. On my way to the restaurant, I passed a small church tucked back off the road. Out front it had a sign board with this message: "Live by faith and not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

That's it! If I try to love my neighbor by sight, I see too many things that I do not like. I see politics with which I do not agree. I see carelessness about the Gospel. I see selfishness that wants to take advantage of others. I see ego-driven decisions. If I love my neighbor by sight, there is not always much there to love.

So, the apostle Paul has told us to love by faith. Faith that God loves that neighbor. Faith that God is seeking ways to work in that neighbor's life. Faith that love is the gift that keeps on giving.

And the same goes for me. I do not always love myself - my failures, my emptiness, my disappointments. But, if I am to love self, as well as neighbor, the gift of faith is still the key to loving myself: Faith that God loves me, faith that God is seeking ways to work in my life. Faith that love is the gift that keeps on giving.

For that matter, how can I love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)? Sometimes my heart is frail; sometimes my soul is struggling; sometimes my mind is confused; sometimes my strength is lacking. But, Jesus has invited us - shall we say instructed us? - to love God with the best we have got, even though our best falls short of perfection. "All of my heart" includes the broken places. "All of my soul" includes the uncertain places. "All of my mind" includes those chaotic places. "All of my strength" includes my very weakness. Bring it all to God, not just what you think you've got worked out.

Then, when I got to the restaurant for lunch, I had their Mandarin Walnut Salad with Grilled Chicken. It was delicious. God is good.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Emil Brunner (*I Believe in the Living God*, Westminster Press) wrote: "True Christian faith is not 'to believe something,' but to trust and obey the One who speaks to us in the Bible and through the creed, with our whole heart."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You first loved me, so now I love..."

April 21

Text: Matthew 15:21-28 “A Gentle Woman’s Great Faith”

Jesus stepped across ethnic boundaries and healed the daughter of a Gentile women (Matthew 15:28). He wanted her to be coming to Him in faith, so he teased her a bit (Matthew 15:24, 26). When he said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he might have been quoting an old Jewish proverb, but he was probably making the point that Jewish customs and Gentiles customs were different. Few, if any, Jewish households would have had family pets, so He is acknowledging that He is dealing with someone of another background and tradition.

When she responds out of her own tradition (Gentiles kept dogs as pets), Jesus knows that she is aware of the ethnic differences, but moves to acknowledge her “great faith” (Matthew 15:28). The love and power of Jesus leapt across human divisions.

What life divisions do we need to address? Race? Gender? Religion? Geography? Politics? Sexual orientation? Culture? Who is “the other” in our daily encounters?

The church I attend has a bi-weekly Zoom meeting to explore racism. Recently, we have been reading and discussing a book that challenges racist behavior. Our leader often begins a session by asking, “Is there anything you read for tonight that you’d like to talk about?” Almost every time, the first thing mentioned is something with which one of us disagrees. Surely those anti-racism theories are not aimed at nice people like us! In a couple of nights, our group is going to see a drama that argues that being nice is not enough. What about justice? What about equity? (Surely this play is not going to be about nice people like us!)

Most students of the Bible teach that the Gospel according to Matthew is aimed at the Jewish community. (It begins with seventeen verses of Jewish history.) That reality means that this account of a Gentile woman with faith underlines the boundary-free love that Jesus exhibited.

Jesus took the initiative to go to the district of Tyre and Sidon. This was Gentile territory and Jesus would have known that as he headed that way. When is my life “foreign territory” for Jesus? And, yet, He still comes looking for me!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ibram X. Kendi (*How to Be an Antiracist*, One World) has written: “Ethnic antiracism: A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between racialized ethnic groups...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator of us all, help me move across boundaries to meet more of Your people...”

April 28

Text: John 4:21-42 “Samaritans Encounter the Messiah”

There are a ton of places in this week’s focal text (John 4:21-42) where we might dig in to find rich gifts for our faith journey. Marriage (v. 17). Prophet (v. 19). Worship (v. 20). Jerusalem (v. 20). Salvation (v. 21). Jews (v. 22). God (v. 24). Spirit (v. 23, v. 24). Truth (v. 23, v. 24). Messiah (v. 25). Christ (v. 25, v. 26). Disciples (v. 27). Gender (v. 27). Food (v. 32). Harvest (v. 35). Samaritans (v. 39). World (v. 42). Whew!

Let’s start with the last word in this text: “world.” The Gospel writer John uses this word almost sixty times in his telling of the story of Jesus. John begins by saying that this Christ not only created the world, but also lived in this same world as we do (John 1:10). And, in one of the most familiar passages of Scripture (John 3:16), John reminds us that God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son. And now when Jesus has this encounter with a Samaritan woman (Yes! A woman! In that time, men did not talk with women in public.), John closes the account with the testimony of the outsider group (Samaritans) who now see and claim that Jesus is the Savior of the world, available for all.

The Greek word translated “world” is κόσμος - cosmos. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press) points out that this word also means “orderly arrangement.” God’s intent for the world and its people is harmony, community, togetherness - an orderly arrangement. When we reflect God’s created purpose, we do not choose up sides (John 4:21). It is not *my* way or *your* way; it is *our* way.

In this encounter, Jesus gave two examples of “we are in this together.” He shared with a woman - and gender boundaries were overcome. He shared with a Samaritan - and ethnic boundaries were overcome. No wonder the disciples were astonished (John 4:27). No wonder “many Samaritans” felt a new acceptance (John 4:39).

I am left to ask myself this question: How big is my world? What are dividing lines that I create that separate what God created to be together? And I hear the closing verse of this week’s text: “...this is truly the Savior of the world.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Meet the Methodists (Abingdon Press), Charles Allen quotes John Wesley: “Solitary religion is not found (in the Gospel of Christ)... The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness... This we have from Christ that he who loves God, loves his brother also.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator of the world, You call us to live as one people...”