

Prayer (sung):

O God who made the heart and ear,  
we listen care'fly as you draw near,  
to hear your word in many ways,  
and live your life throughout our days.

Scripture:

Ephesians 4:15, 32

“It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”- St. Francis

This morning, in this sermon, I open my heart to you in confession.

Ya'll, I have a tough time, a theological struggle, with Paul and his letters to the churches.

How about you?

For a long time, I didn't like Paul and his writing.

Sometimes, I still don't.

But as I've served, prayed, and studied my way through my preparation for this sermon, an understanding has come over me like the sun at sunrise, softly and quietly, peacefully and warm.

I've learned that it's not really Paul and his writing that I don't like.

It's peoples interpretations of him and his writings that bother me.

Listen, his writings have been used to defend slavery and Jim Crow segregation in the South.

His writings have been used to subjugate women.

His writings have been used to hurt LGBTQ+ people.

His writings have been used to turn away migrants fleeing poverty and violence.

Paul was telling the truth in love to help us grow in every way more and more like Jesus.

Their interpretation of Paul and his writing was telling a lie in hate to make the world in their own image - of white supremacy, male chauvinism, and a dehumanizing idea of LGBTQ+ friends and migrant neighbors.

I don't like those interpretations of Paul's words.

I think they're lies.

I think they're hateful.

I think they have nothing to do with the truth in love Paul was trying to show and tell.

I think they have nothing to do with the gospel life of Jesus.

Albert Schweitzer, one of my heroes, a missionary doctor at Lambaréné, Gabon in French Equatorial Africa who had a genius for music, philosophy and medicine, and who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his work among the poor, taught me something important about our quest of the historical Jesus and, by inference, of the historical Paul.

We want to see the real Jesus.

We want to hear the real Paul.

But alas, when we begin to tell their stories, they end up looking and sounding a lot like us.

We fall into the old trap the great Irish writer George Bernard Shaw warns us about.

“God created human beings in his own image,” says Shaw, “And since then human beings have been trying to return the favor.”

We do this with Jesus and his life and work.

We do this with Paul and his letters.

We create them in our own image.

So this morning, I'd like us to ask some 'wonder' questions together.

I'd like for us to see Jesus as he really is.

I'd like for us to hear Paul for what he really says.

I wonder.

What does it look like when a community of people, people who follow Jesus, people who are a part of the beloved community, grow in every way more and more like Jesus?

Let's look closely.

And what does it sound like when a community of people, people who follow Jesus, people who are a part of the beloved community, speak the truth in love like the real Paul?

Let's listen carefully.

What if Paul was in prison today, in Washington, DC, as he was in prison in Rome all of those years ago?

Why would he be there?

In Rome, he was in prison because 1) He taught and advocated for the desegregation of a world where Gentiles and Jews 'othered' each other and created laws and social norms that kept them

apart. He tried to bring them together. Paul was in prison because he fought for integration, that Jews and Gentiles should 'one another' each other and accept each other as siblings created in the image and likeness of God.

And Paul was in prison because 2) He taught people to say, "Jesus is Lord." Because of that confession, people were saying that Caesar was not Lord. Caesar and his followers did not like that. So the Emperor Nero had Paul beheaded. No one or no group who holds political power, socio-economic power, cultural power, military power, and religious power likes the confession "Jesus is Lord." They want people to say that they are.

Perhaps Paul would be in prison in Washington, DC today because he was teaching that LGBTQ+ people should be accepted as siblings by all other people around them. Perhaps he would be in prison because he was teaching that migrants should be welcomed into the United States and given a fair chance to make a better life for themselves and their families instead of being arrested and deported by masked ICE agents.

Perhaps Paul would be in prison because he would stand up at political rallies and doggedly proclaim, "Jesus is Lord."

What would he write?

I think he would write the truth in love, as he did all those centuries ago, and truth in love that would help us grow in every way more and more like Jesus, that would cause a "bump BUMP, bump BUMP" in our hearts that would help us know the message he's proclaiming is wonderful and true.

What are some stories around us about people who can show us what this "growing in every way more and more like Jesus looks like?"

What are some stories around us about people who can show us what this "speaking the truth in love" like Paul sounds like?

Here are three stories that I came across this week that made my heart go "bump BUMP, bump BUMP" because I knew deep down in my heart they were stories of people who show me what Jesus looks like, what Paul sounds like.

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde is one of my heroes. Have you heard of her? She's the bishop of the Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. In her 14th year of service, she's the first female bishop of the diocese. She wrote a book that's meaningful to me, *How We Learn To Be Brave*. Boy, is she a good person to write that book.

On January 21 of this year, the day after the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump, she preached a sermon for a prayer service at the National Cathedral with the Trump family and other prominent people in attendance.

As she concluded the sermon, she remembered the dehumanizing language and demagogic rhetoric Trump uses in his political speeches and decided to speak directly to him.

"Let me make one final plea, Mr President," she said as she looked closely at him through her bespectacled, kind eyes. "Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you

have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families who fear for their lives.”

“And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings,” she continued, “Who labor in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals – they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples.”

“Have mercy, Mr President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.”

“May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being,” she concluded, “Speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world.”

This is what it sounds like to hear the truth in love, from Jesus, from Paul, and from each other. This is what it looks like to grow in every way more and more like Jesus. This is what it looks and sounds like when the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. Bishop Budde’s words make a “bump BUMP, bump BUMP” in my heart because I know deep down they are liberating and true.

D. Esperanza was 13 years old when he left the farms and fields of Naranjito, Honduras on the migrant trail to El Norte, the Mexican - United States border. His abuela was the last living caregiver for him and for his younger cousin in Naranjito. Then she died of cancer. The boys had to make the difficult decision to take the treacherous five-month journey through Central America and Mexico to search for una vida mejor, a better life, in the United States.

D.’s parents had left him in Naranjito when he was a baby. It was their great hope to find jobs in America and send money back to Naranjito so the family could live above a subsistence level and thrive in the world around them. It was now D. and his cousin’s great hope to reunite with them.

Along the way, the boys formed a deep bond, the kind of bond that develops through hoping and suffering together. When they arrived at the US border, that bond was broken. They were brutally separated from each other at the border because of President Trump’s “Zero Tolerance” immigration policy.

When he was captured and processed at a child detention center, neither D. nor his family were given an update on when he’d be released or where he’d go next.

While on his journey to America and in detention, he wrote about his experience in a wide-ruled composition notebook. His words, filled with pain, cruelty, friendship, and resilience broke my heart into pieces and put it back together again in a more human shape.

His story is a living testament to life and death on the border. In the midst of the senseless inhumanity and violence of US immigration policy, D. found hope in the solidarity he and his companions created in the detention center.

Within D.'s story you will meet a person who will cause you to take a deep breath, sigh, and whisper, "I have seen Jesus. I have heard Paul."

Gerardo Iván Morales, who was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States when he was five, went to the locked gates of the detention center in 2018 to provide aid and comfort the asylum-seeking children who were detained there and used his gifts and talents as a journalist to help D. share his story with the world.

This is what it sounds like to hear the truth in love, from Jesus, from Paul, and from each other. This is what it looks like like to grow in every way more and more like Jesus. This is what it looks and sounds like when the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. D. and Gerardo's actions and words make a "bump BUMP, bump BUMP" in my heart because I know deep down they are liberating and true.

On Thursday, I made my way down Stone Avenue to Laurens Road for my weekly visit to the Greenville Detention Center, the jail. I was going to visit Bobby. "I don't think I've ever met Bobby," I said to Don and Robin. "You'll be glad you did," said Don with a smile. "We all love Bobby," said Robin.

For this visit, I had to talk with Bobby via video chat. We were in the same building together, but a wall and a screen separated us from seeing each other face to face.

I wish you could've been with me to see Bobby's smile when I introduced myself and told him I was from Triune Mercy. "Don says "hey" and told me I'd be glad I met you," I said. "And Robin says "hey" and told me that everyone at Triune loves you."

When I said those words, a stillness and quietness fell over him. Love is a powerful thing. Sometimes we can only stand in awe and reverence when we're in its presence.

Jail is a lonely place, you know. Not only because you're locked away from people you love and who love you back, but also because you have nothing but time to think about the wrong you've done and carry your guilt on your back and in your heart like a giant bag of stones.

"One thing about jail," said Bobby after a minute or two, "Is you've got lots of time to listen. And I've been listening a lot lately. I've been listening for God's voice, and God's been saying, "I love you, Bobby. I forgive you."

Wow.

"Tell all the people at Triune I say, "If God tells you to go, then go. But if God's not gonna go with you, don't go." (I love when people share deep street knowledge with me.)

He kept sharing his story with me.

"When I was out in the world," he said, "I started an Angel Tree at Christmas time. I didn't want inner-city kids to wake up on Christmas morning to an empty tree. Every kid needs a toy at Christmas. Even though I'm locked up, I'm gonna make the Angel Tree happen again this year. It might not have my name on it, but it'll be there."

When he finished saying those words, a stillness and quiet came over me. Yep, love is a powerful thing. Sometimes we can only stand in awe and reverence in its presence, even as it pours out of the heart of someone who is locked up behind iron bars.

Bobby had heard those powerful words from Triune Mercy over and over again. “You are God’s child, and you are welcome here.” Those words, that love, changed him, is changing him still. And they’re giving him hope to live and give, even as he waits for the walls to come down and for his feet to walk freely with his little daughter and his beloved mother again on the streets of Greenville again.

This is what it sounds like to hear the truth in love, from Jesus, from Paul, and from each other. This is what it looks like like to grow in every way more and more like Jesus. This is what it looks and sounds like when the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. Bobby’s life makes a “bump BUMP, bump BUMP” in my heart because I know deep down it is liberating and true.

So, beloved community, what can we do here and now at Triune Mercy to sound like Paul and be like Jesus?

In another book by Bishop Budde, *Receiving Jesus: The Way of Love*, she shares 7 disciplines that we can practice to help us love each other, love the world, love our enemies, like Jesus.

- 1) Turn (pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus)
- 2) Learn (reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teaching)
- 3) Pray (dwell intentionally with God each day)
- 4) Worship (gather in community weekly to thank, praise and dwell with God)
- 5) Bless (share faith and unselfishly give and serve)
- 6) Go (cross boundaries listen deeply, and live like Jesus)
- 7) Rest receive the gift of God’s grace, peace, and restoration)

Let’s practice Bishop Buddy’s disciplines. Let’s be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgive us. Let’s sound like Paul and be like Jesus.

The world needs to see hear and see.

Amen.