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Abington Presbyterian Church

Amos 5:21-24

Romans 12:1-2, 9-18

August 30, 2020

A VIBRANT FAITH: ETHOS

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

I invite you to think about someone whose faith you admire because that person's life is full of faith because their faith is full of life. I hope it isn't too hard for you to come up with someone to be thinking of. What is it about that person's faith that is compelling for you? I am confident that not one of you is thinking about someone whose declaration of what he/she believes is quite different from the values that person proclaims through the way they live. A faith that is less than authentic is not a viable faith.

This is the third of four sermons in a series about what makes for a viable faith, as that is relevant for us as individuals, for us as a community of faith, and for others who wonder what Christian faith is all about. We are examining particular Greek nouns week by week in this series. First, we looked at logos, the New Testament noun for word, as in God's word that comes to us through the revelation of scripture and in the person of Jesus. Last week, we looked at the word zelos, as we explored how we are called to live out our faith with a zeal that reflects similar causes for God's zeal. Today, we explore another Greek noun, ethos. This word has a more complicated fit within this series. Ethos means character that illustrates the nature of a person, a community, or even a nation. A person with a vibrant faith has an ethos that normally would show that person to be genuine, honest, caring, compassionate, and fair.

One of the things that gives us a sense of hope as people of faith is that we don't have to be perfect for God to love us or use us. If you happen to not yet have all of those qualities that I listed, we can celebrate that God does not give up on us. As a result, by God's grace, we can anticipate opportunities to grow qualitatively throughout our faith journey, which is part of what brings vitality to our faith.

Through much of my school-age years, my family lived in Alabama and we were quite active in our Presbyterian church there. These were years of racial tension in our community and in our nation during the late sixties and early seventies. At the church where I was growing in my understanding of the faith, I heard a lot about God's love, but I do not ever recall hearing about God's deep commitment to what was just and right. It was only much later in different settings that I began to understand how much the Hebrew law was focused on the needs of the poor and the outsiders, how much it sought to set up systems that were just and treated all people fairly. As I began to read the Hebrew prophets, I came to realize that so much of their message was about what was just, and how in a variety of instances, Hebrew society was falling short in living up to God's good intent for all. I was diligent in going to Sunday school and youth group and during college, even teaching Sunday school, but I don't think it was until I was in seminary that I first heard today's reading from Amos that is the most quoted passage from that book. The prophet, speaking on behalf of God, tells the people to actually stop their worship practices and their offering of sacrifices until their lives reflected a commitment to the justice that was at the core of God's good intent for all people. The imagery, for a dry part of the world, was rich: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

I do imagine that I didn't hear such things in the church as I grew up because justice issues were controversial then, and so public policy issues were treated as taboo, not to be spoken of, so as not to cause the church to split. I understand that justice issues in the current time of racial tensions can be controversial as well. It was while I was in seminary that the old Presbyterian denomination in the south and the Presbyterian denomination in the north finally reconciled 122 years after splitting apart at the beginning of the Civil War. That was a major, long-overdue move toward healing and integrity as Presbyterians. When we reunited, the ordination vows that we ended up with included having every Presbyterian deacon, every ruling elder, every minister of word and sacrament at his or her ordination taking a vow of commitment to try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

In our scripture reading from Romans, a central aspect of the ethos, the character, to which the Christian community was called, was to have its values shaped not by the world around it, but rather for it to be transformed by its desire to be in accord with God's good will for itself and for the world. At the center of that was a call for the faith community's love to be genuine.

Love that is deeply genuine toward all of our sisters and brothers works diligently for what is just and right for all.

Among the reasons justice does not roll down like waters throughout our land is the unwritten rule that church is not a place where justice issues can be talked about and pursued. Such silent treatment within the church has been interpreted by many, including my younger self, that the church stood for the status quo of injustice. These kinds of church practices indicated to me that it thought much of what is central to the gospel was not relevant to the struggles of our society. This ethos of a prohibition of speaking of such issues within parts of the church has been among the practices that serve like a dam holding the flowing waters of justice back from our society. Certainly, as those who are called to reflect the love and justice of Jesus Christ, we not only should be proclaiming that black lives matter, we ought to be calling for structures that enable black lives to thrive through the same opportunities that white lives have been given. Let me be quick to say that it does not serve the purpose of a congregation to advocate for one political party over another. What we do as a faith community is not to be partisan in any way. However, the issues that affect the well-being, of the lack thereof, for God's beloved children, by the witness and example of scripture, absolutely is something we are called upon to address. We will not always agree on all issues of public policy, but we need to not be disengaged from the needs of the broader community or from the transformative power of God's Spirit at work within, through, and beyond us.

I am thankful for the moral leadership that many prominent athletes have shown this week as they have reacted strongly toward yet another instance of police violence toward a person of color. I just think a church that reflects the ethos of Jesus Christ ought to be showing as much or more moral leadership than professional athletes. Racial inequalities are not the only issue to be addressed. Where does the ethos of Amos and of Jesus lead us in regards to concern for those who are poor? Perhaps, it is time to speak out about particular public issues where there has been reticence in the past.

A friend of mine named Eileen tells about a time when she took her car to a garage to get it serviced. While she waited for the work to be done, she looked for something of interest to read in the waiting area. For some reason, in addition to the old magazines, there was a small white manual for boat owners. She was not much into boating, but considering the alternatives, she began to flip through the manual, where she found a chapter called, "The Rules of the Open Seas." There it described two kinds of vessels. One group includes vessels such as rowboats and sailboats, that have no power of their own, so their navigation is dependent on the tide, wind, and human effort. Another class of boats have motors and have the power and steering to go where they want when they want. Now when these two kinds of vessels meet on the open sea, what is to happen to avoid a collision? The rules state that the power boat that can

maneuver most easily is the one that must alter its course, so that the boat with less control over its direction can make it to safe harbor. Eileen said she quickly turned to the front of the book to discover the author of this great theological treatise. Turns out it was the Department of Transportation of the state of New Jersey.¹

There are those of us who figuratively have the privilege and power to travel in life choosing where we will go. There are others who have little privilege and power to determine their journey through life. As those who are called to exhibit an ethos that tries to show both the love and justice of Jesus Christ through what we say and do, it seems to be time to change our direction for the benefit of those who have less power to make it to safe harbor on their own. In our scripture passage from Romans, we are called to discern and to show the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. We do not want to block, indeed, we want to demonstrate through our words and actions the rich flow of love and justice that comes from the heart of God intended for all people. And in times to come, when someone invites people to think about those whose life is full of faith and whose faith is full of life, then may they be drawn to the witness of a faith community called Abington Presbyterian Church. May the rich flow of God's Spirit that inspires and empowers love and justice shape such a vibrant faith within us. Amen.

¹ From a story told by Eileen Lindner in a sermon at a Children's Defense Fund conference.