

A few weeks ago we included recognition of our graduates within the 11:00 Service and I also took a few minutes to urge my annual summer safety message onto all the youth of the church. I know several parents very much appreciated my remarks, one even asked me if I would ever think about saying something to this same group and their older siblings, discouraging tattoos! But I think I will take a pass on that one....

It has become quite fashionable for many people to have a tattoo. It is not something with which I have any personal experience and from what I have read of the pain and discomfort involved, I am not likely to be beating a path to my local parlor! The idea of a tattoo seems very often to be a way for someone to mark out in unique way, their identity, often with respect to another person – such as John loves Doris - or as an expression of membership in a group or affiliation to some cause – such as Harley Davidson or yes, even Jesus loves me!

One thing about tattoos - it is very important to be certain of all the words, images, colors and spelling to be used because once it is on there it is real hard to get it removed. The following is a list of, “THINGS YOU DON'T EVER WANT TO HEAR AT THE TATTOO PARLOR”:

- \* "Eagle?" "Oh, I thought you said BEAGLE."
- \* "The flag's all done and you know, the folds of fat make a nice waving effect."
- \* Oops....
- \* "We're all out of red, so I used pink."
- \* "There are 2 Os in Bob, right?"
- \* "Gosh, I hate it when I get the hiccups."
- \* "Anything else you want to say? You've got plenty of room back here."
- \* "I'll bet you can't tell I've never done this before."

Getting the correct instructions, the correct colors, the correct wording and spelling is an issue in the tattoo parlor. Getting the correct text, wording, and translation is also an issue for us when it comes to reading and studying the Bible. The title of this Sermon, “The Most Important Verse Not in the Bible?” arises from exactly what two of the verses in today’s Gospel Reading actually say. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the version that we typically read from on Sundays, the version found in the pews, uses extensive footnotes. In the footnotes for today’s passage we read that some ancient manuscripts insert an extra verse at Luke 9:56. It is this extra verse, the one we find in the footnotes, that just could be the most important verse not in the Bible.

Check out the footnotes for yourselves if you like. If we were to include what is in the footnotes these verses would read thus: 51When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55But he (Jesus) turned and rebuked them – (i.e. Jesus rebuked James and John ) and said, “You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them. 56Then they went on to another village.

The main additional statement, the greatest verse “not in the Bible” would be this statement - “the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.” A statement that helps clarify that Jesus always had and has loving intentions towards people. Such a verse would be a very useful, helpful, important corrective to those who pick and choose the words and verses they quote, so much so that at times such people present a picture of a Jesus I do not recognize from the Scriptures - a very vindictive, mean, narrow-minded, destructive, ill-tempered, angry Jesus.

I wanted to include this sermon within this sermon series “Learning from the Prophets” because we have been prone to believe that the entire ministry of the prophets was all about condemnation. Too often we have imagined that their “raison d’être” was to issue threats and promises of divine retribution and destruction.

I want to encourage you to stand well back from such a view because while there is for sure in the preaching of the prophets condemnation and threat, such emphases are not the summation, not the conclusion of the message of the prophets. Condemnation and threats, truth-telling we could call it is merely a stepping stone on the way to the real point of the message of the prophets of God, namely that grace is offered, love extended, forgiveness available, renewal possible. Any words, any harsh words of accusation or denouncement, inevitably open up into words of hope, and melt into tender, loving words that carry within them the challenge of purpose and change.

Those of us who believe, those of us who seek to live faithfully, those of us who believe that we are on the inside track with and to God, who imagine that we have faith at least somewhat figured out, who think that we have some kind of handle on God, who are sure that we are moving forward on the right path, are very often tempted to hear the calls of the prophets as being directed at other people: People out there, people over there, people who look or sound or speak or act differently from us. It is always tempting to imagine that God has a message, a word, for the people in the row behind us or the pew in front of us, or the person sitting next to us – “nudge nudge”! The truth is quite different; all along the message of the prophets was and is for you and me, for each and all of us. The message of the prophets of God is for the people of God, all the people of God, not the non-believers but the believers, not the outsiders but the insiders, not the folks over there, but the person right (inside) here.

The particular circumstances of this incident as they are recorded for us in Luke 9 are very instructive. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus knows the path and journey that lies ahead. Jesus sends an advance team into a Samaritan village to prepare for a visit there. "But the people there did not welcome him," writes Luke. Because they rejected Jesus, or maybe because of the ethnic hostility between Jews and Samaritans, the disciples James and John explode in what I am sure they called “righteous anger”. I would suggest that the attitude of James and John completely startles Jesus, as they ask, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?!" Could it be that they were speaking figuratively, not literally – maybe, yes? But that's small consolation – it seems they wanted revenge and history tells us that some figurative sense of revenge often lead to real consequences.

The response of Jesus is illuminating. Instead of rebuking the Samaritans who rejected him, Jesus rebuked James and John his own disciples. James and John thought they were in the right, after all they were followers of Jesus and they thought that they were in the right, defending Jesus, upset because the Samaritan village had not been willing to welcome their Master. And this is where our extra verse

comes in, the most important verse that isn't in the Bible: "And Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'"

The appearance of this verse in the footnotes tells us that the balance of scholarship suggests that such words on the lips of Jesus are not found at this point in the Gospel of Luke; that these words are not present in the vast majority of the ancient manuscripts and/or may be missing from some of the very earliest and most reliable manuscripts, part of the huge library of NT manuscripts, the raw materials from which scholars compile the most accurate version of the Greek New Testament.

We therefore don't know if Jesus spoke those words in this specific context, but they clearly express the broader Jesus tradition about which there's no debate. For example the "non-verse" sounds very like the authentic Luke 19:10, ironically one reason why textual scholars suggest the non-verse is a later addition. That verse says: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Other examples of this tradition would include John 3:17: "God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world." There's even a similar and spurious "non-verse" at Matthew 18:11: "The Son of Man came to save what was lost." The conclusion would be that while this interpolation in Luke 9 might not be authentic, its sentiment certainly is!

When James and John invoked divine wrath on the Samaritans, they betrayed an attitude diametrically opposed to everything Jesus said and did. A few verses earlier John tried to stop an exorcist from healing a person because "he was not one of us" (Luke 9:49). You would think that having been corrected once John might have adopted a more "Jesus-like" attitude but no, he was still very quick to throw the book at any who wouldn't welcome his Jesus. These zealous disciples transformed the good news of God's unconditional and limitless love for all people into the bad news that God had it in for any who did not appreciate Jesus or Jesus' disciples. James and John believed that the "good news" of Jesus belonged to them and to them alone and for all others there was no good news, just the "bad news" of condemnation.

In our time and place there are many, way too many people whose religion, specifically their religion or their specific brand of their religion breeds suspicion, division, and even hatred. And this is also the case in the Christian community, we hear them on talk radio, we flick past them on the so-called "Christian" channels on TV – an irony if ever there was one! I say an irony because it takes just a few minutes of watching to hear the slick preacher list off all sorts of people whom they will assert are beyond the reach of the love of God, more the attitude of James and John than the attitude of Jesus who was open and welcoming to every kind and sort of person without limit.

We have a word that we use for this attitude of Jesus, we use this same word to describe this essential element in the personality and character of God, we turn to this same word whenever we talk about the central nature, the very being of God, we are drawn to this word, inevitably, by the Jesus who always lived out the truth of the most important verse not in the Bible – "...the Son of Man did not come to destroy lives, but to save them." The word I have been talking about is of course the word LOVE – LOVE as the eternal and utter expression of all God is towards all people and towards all of God's creation.

God is Love! Now that is worthy of a tattoo! That is worth of living and believing! God is love! A truth that can change and re-make and re-shape our lives and our living.

God is Love! A truth that is turning this world upside down, drawing the world towards the orbit that God intends it to have.

God is Love! And so we and all who trust in Jesus Christ must seek to love after the example and in the manner of Jesus Christ.

God is Love – this is the affirmation that must control our understanding of God. God is love - must define who we understand God to be and all God is and does.

God is love – must be the truth that we seek even as we hear the ringing, piercing words of the prophets.

God is love – through Elijah for the widow of Zarapheth.

God is love – for Naboth the victim and even for Ahab the victimizer.

God is love – for Elijah even when he is on the run from God.

God is love – this is the message of the prophets, the prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah and after him, Elisha, and this is also the message of the prophet of the New Testament, Jesus Christ.

God is love – describes our call, our pattern, our life, our acting, our being as we seek to carry and share the message and the meaning and the sharing of all God is in who we are and in what we do. “The Son of Man did not come to destroy lives, but to save them.”

God is love – let us go to be this truth, to live this truth, to demonstrate this experience that we have of God in all we are and do.

Let us be ready to share this love that God has with and for all people not thinking that we are in the right, not thinking that we have life all figured out, not imagining that we are any better than anyone else!

Let us allow God is Love to re-make us, and inspire us to welcome the lost and last and the least.

God is love, not a bad ending phrase for this final sermon of my first year as Pastor of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church – God is love!

In my heart I believe that this is the message that God wishes for me to press upon you, not only today but on into the future. It is YOUR AND OUR awareness of all that it means to say GOD IS LOVE – it is YOUR AND OUR experience of GOD IS LOVE - that alone can free us to be the church that God needs us to be - connecting to God, connecting to one another, connecting to the needs of all our neighbors and connecting to the future – God’s future. My best and most passionate and most telling, and maybe prophetic proclamation for you the people of God in this church is this– GOD IS LOVE – so live with God, live in love, live the life of Jesus, live the love of Jesus. Count no one out, count everyone in. Serve, give, pray, follow. Amen.