

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for June 28, 2020

Palisade Bethel Lutheran Church

“The Good Life”

During his 30-year ministry, a certain pastor became known far and wide as an effective preacher: a spellbinder. Each week he would finish writing his Sunday sermon on Wednesday, and for the next three days, he would practice reading it aloud in his study – often very loud. One Saturday night, as he went to work on his delivery, he found someone had tacked a sign on the door. It read: “This is where our pastor practices what he preaches.”

In a gospel lesson, Jesus says to His disciples: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:39) This is one of many ways Jesus instructed his followers to practice what they preach.

In the Apostle John’s account of the “Last Supper,” Jesus rises from the table, pours water into a basin, washes the disciples’ feet, and wipes them dry with a towel. “When He had washed their feet, He said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done for you? You call me teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is no greater than his master.’” (John 13:12-16)

Earlier Jesus told the disciples He had come not to be served, but to serve. And later He would say to them, “He who believes in me will also do the work that I do.” (John 14:12) Practice what you preach!

Throughout the centuries, wise men and women have been trying to identify and define, the “good life” – the best use we can make of our years on earth. Socrates equated the “good life” with self-knowledge. Aristotle taught the “good life” consisted of developing the power of reason. The stoics identified the “good life” as character-development, achieved through discipline, and self-denial. And, of course, there have always been hopes and dreams for the “good life” in terms of ease and comfort, money, and possessions. Sad to say, in today’s world, they are the dominant force. In terms of dedication to a cause, in terms of practicing what they preach, the disciples of greed are number one. And before we assume, they’re all “out there” somewhere, we need to look within for our own definition of the “good life.”

Describing the “good life” as he felt it from within, C.S. Lewis wrote: “We really do not have the slightest notion of the tremendous thing Jesus Christ means to make of us. “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

The command “Be ye perfect,” is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He means to make us into creatures who can obey that command... He is going to make good His words, if we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose. He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature. Pulsating with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine... The process will be long, and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said! “He who loses his life for my sake will find it...the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve...I have given you an example that you should do what I have done.” He meant what He said!

Hostility transformed into compassion is a theme that runs through the writings of the Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko. In his autobiography, Yevtushenko tells of the day in 1944 when his mother took him from Serbia to Moscow. There they saw some 20,000 German prisoners of war being marched through the streets:

The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women – Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and thin hunched shoulders which had borne half the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction the column was to appear.

At last we saw it. The German generals marched at the head; massive chins stuck out – their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over these common people who had defeated them. The women were clenching their fists. The Russian soldiers and police officers had all they could do to hold them back.

Then, all at once, something happened to them. They saw ordinary German soldiers; thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches, or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades. The soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent – the only sound was the shuffling of boots, and the thumping of crutches.

Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward, and touch a police officer’s shoulder, saying, “Let me through.” There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief, and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread.

She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now, from every side, women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.

“Father forgive them,” Jesus said from the cross – and He meant what He said. “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you,” Jesus said to His disciples, just before His passion and death – and He meant what He said.

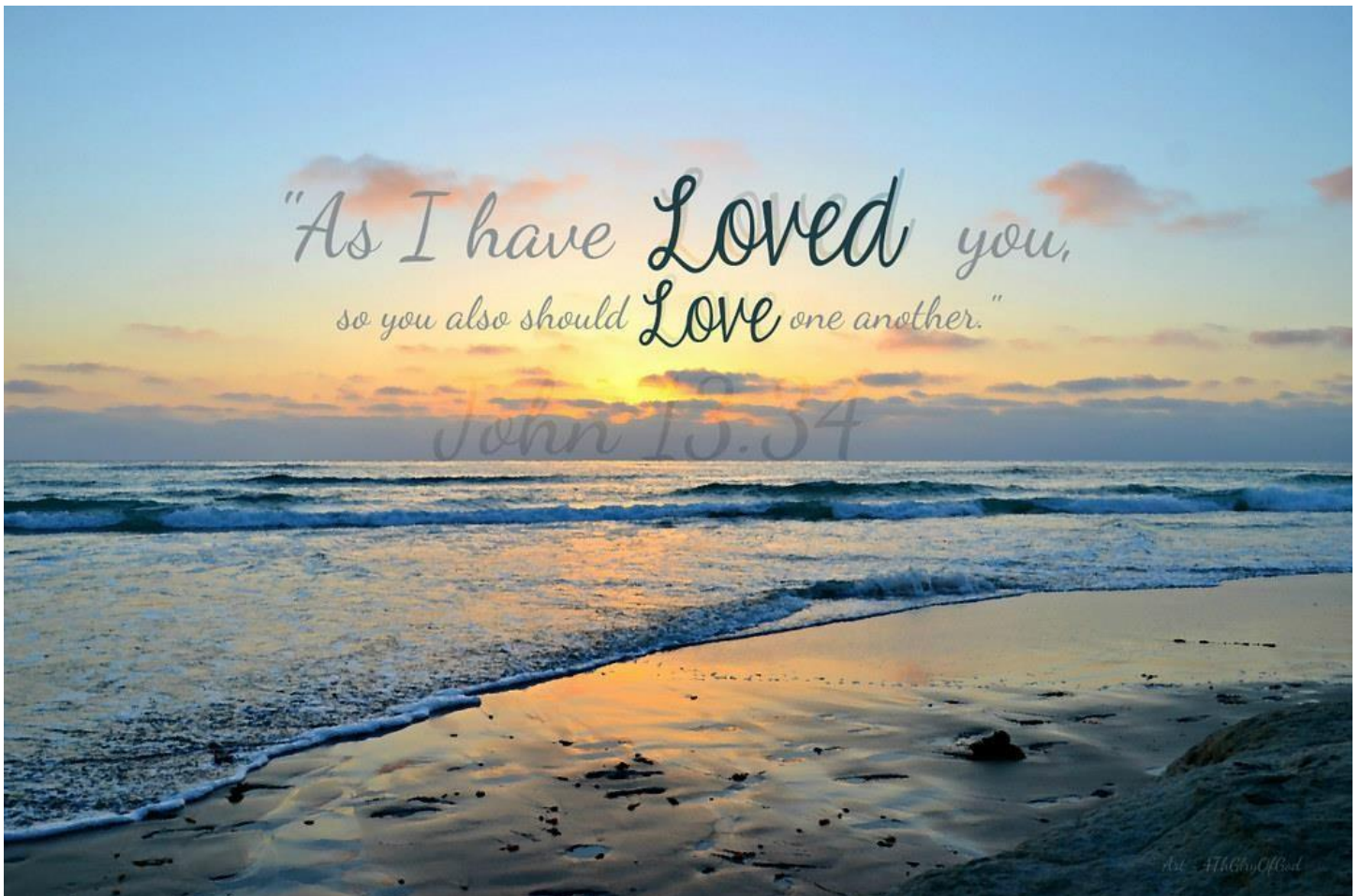
Once upon a time, a woman in tattered clothes and her ragged-looking little boy stood on a big city street corner begging for food, or money to buy food. It so happened that among the passerby was a wealthy man who looked, but neither spoke, nor offered any help. But when he arrived at his palatial home, and looked

upon his dinner table laden with the finest foods, he began to think about the poor little waif, and his distressed mother.

And the more he thought about that situation, the angrier he became at God. Then he clenched his fist, and shook it in what he thought to be God's direction. "How can you allow such misery?" he cried out. "Why don't you do something to help those unfortunate people?" And, somewhere, deep within himself, came God's answer: "I did. I created you."

We can proclaim in lofty words the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can shout it from the rooftops. We can broadcast it to the ends of the earth. But, even as we do, we will not be able to experience the good life in Christ – nor will we ever – until we practice what we preach.

AMEN!



"Soli Deo gloria"