

I begin this sermon by sharing with you a story about a member of this congregation no longer among us in this world but who is counted as one of the saints in the Kingdom of God. This is a man about whom Wendell Berry--the novelist, poet, essayist--may have had in mind when he said of one of his characters: *He was not a churchly man, but a man of unconfining righteousness.*

The story about this some-time member of this congregation is that a long, long time ago when he was a younger, businessman in this town--well known, respected, highly thought of--another member of Christ & Holy Trinity and a businessman of this community did him "wrong" in a business deal. Two respected members of our church and community, two Christians whom we assume were striving to live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.

You will remember Jesus often told parables of a similar nature to awaken in his listeners new perspectives and understanding. Were we to take the roles of those two men in that story--what might we have done? What actually happened was that the one wronged by the other, so upset someone would call themselves Christian and think themselves an upstanding member of Christ & Holy Trinity while treating another with such disdain and disregard, left this church and never stepped foot into Christ & Holy Trinity ever again. To my knowledge, the only time he ever again entered this church was the day he was buried from it.

Stung by his colleague's disregard of good business practice and hurt by the hypocrisy of a fellow member of this congregation, this one-time member turned his back on this congregation rejecting the hypocrisy he saw in this church and amongst those who claim an allegiance to Jesus Christ.

It has been often been said that churches are not museums for the well, but way-stations for those on the journey of life--hospitals for those who are ill, the wounded and hurting, the forlorn and lost, those who know and claim their need of God. None among us, even those who think ourselves righteous and more righteous than some, are not without stain and blemish, not needful of the saving, redeeming grace and forgiveness of God. This is why, I believe, we come to this church--we who know we have hurt others consciously and intentionally, but most often unintentionally who know we need the forgiveness and love of God.

We are the ones with fissures, fractures, and foibles of our own making. Even as it is tempting to find fault with the weakness and sins of others, we remember how blind we are to our own sins. And so we come to this church to acknowledge our failures that we be embraced by the love and grace of God. With such assurance we find the strength to raise ourselves up from life's disappointments in order that we serve others, loving them as we have been loved by God.

No one better represents failure and redemption than Jacob--the principal character of last week's story from Genesis. There we heard of Jacob's theft of his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. Though he plotted with his mother Rebekah to steal from his brother, and in spite of his outright deception and overt lie to his father, God still had a plan for Jacob. Even in this one so corrupted by the world, God saw possibilities for the future. And so God wrestles with Jacob. And in that struggle Jacob is transformed, and becomes Israel--the one chosen by God.

Today's Hebrew Scripture continues this fascinating story of Jacob. He has brought his large family--even with the threat of retaliation by his brother Esau--back into the land of Canaan--the Promised land. On this good land Jacob settles, raising his herds, flocks and family. Among his many children Jacob counts Joseph, the "dreamer"--his youngest son born in Jacob's old age--his favorite. Last week's theme of interfamilial rivalry between Esau and Jacob continues in today's saga, this journey of God's chosen ones. Now Joseph and his brothers wrestle for primacy in the family as well as with God.

Jacob Needleman, for many years professor at San Francisco State University, has written a book called, Why Can't We Be Good? (Penguin, New York, 2007). In this he attempts to answer the questions of why human beings—even those inspired by the religions of the world (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) continue to perform so poorly in terms of moral and ethical behavior. Needleman attempts to answer the question plaguing so many critics (and proponents!) of religion and to respond to the distaste of the one-time member of this congregation. Why do the most faithful adherents of the prophets, teachers and masters of the religions of the world ignore those teachings? Why do many of us treat friends, family and strangers in the way that Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher treat their brother Joseph when they say: *Here comes this dreamer...let us kill him...* and they sell their brother for twenty pieces of silver.

Says Needleman: *...ideas of a spiritual teaching arecommunicated.... through symbolic forms...designed to reach the more hidden levels in us of instinct, feeling, and intuition; this is accomplished through myth and story, visual images, architecture, music dance, ritual. But ...at another stage... man's independent intellect with its function of abstract, logical thought needs to be fully engaged, needs to consent to the demands and invitations of the teachings. In a culture such as ours, in which mental knowledge, disconnected from the sensitivity of the body and the feeling, occupies such a dominate place in our lives and our sense of identity, the confrontation with great ideas is central to the process of moral development.*

Many of you know that Michael Burnette, our Organist/choirmaster, will be joined by a new member of the staff—Robert Kwan. Some in the congregation might think that music is a poor way of communicating the Gospel, that we should allocate our resources in other ways. In our music program, however, we engage in that “comprehensive” program suggested by Jacob Needleman in which he says: *ideas of a spiritual teaching arecommunicated.... through symbolic forms...designed to reach the more hidden levels in us of instinct, feeling, and intuition; accomplished through myth and story, visual images, architecture, music, dance, ritual.*

At the end of every program year, Michael gathers the 60 or more youngsters who participate in our choral and sacred music programs for a musical performance such as *Godspell*, or *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Through these musical dramas, (and our Sunday morning church school program called Discovery Kingdom) our young people read, recite, memorize and sing stories of the Bible. They engage in and hopefully see themselves in the foibles and triumphs of these our ancestors of the faith.

Michael and Robert and our church school teachers weave these stories and themes in and through the lives of children in vital ways. Our hope and expectation is that all of this should make a difference in their lives. However, Needleman suggests that since mental knowledge and the intellect are so disconnected today from sensory awareness, something else must happen that these ancient yet always present themes be incorporated into our everyday lives.

As a way of testing his thesis as to why human beings are unable to follow the good and to live morally and ethically responsible lives, Needleman believes that human beings **FORGET** the teachings and the stories. Such a thesis may sound too simple and too ordinary to believe. One of the ways that he has come to this is through years of teaching experience. Here is what he did in a class one day to “prove” his thesis that human beings simply forget.

In addition to your reading assignment, I would like to invite you to try something. This is purely voluntary. For the next two days, experiment with a new relationship to the things that annoy you—starting, if you like, when you leave the classroom in a few minutes. The exercise is simply to step back in yourself and observe your state of being annoyed. Don't try to do anything about it. Don't try to get rid of it or justify it or judge it

to be good or bad. Just observe it and whatever you can see that is connected with it. Step back from it without trying to change it or escape from it.

This was on a Tuesday. On Thursday, the class re-convened. He began the class in the usual way with some abstract lecture and presentation and then causally asked the class how many of them attempted the exercise. Only one hand went up, and then just another. He then said to the class: *we are in front of something important. Answer honestly—remember you are not being graded for this—how many of you simply forgot about the exercise?* He noted that almost everyone in the class then raised their hands. Only two of forty students remembered the exercise. *The fact that almost all of you forgot this exercise, despite the intense interest you showed after it was described needs to be correctly interpreted and not just brushed aside.*

*The fact is all of us are **swallowed by our lives**. We say, ‘Oh, I forgot’ and we calmly move on to the next thing. In this ‘Oh, I forgot’ there lies one of the most fundamental aspects of the human condition, one which, if understood properly, explains why we do not and cannot carry out our good intentions. ...If you go on to study books and teachings dealing with the self-perfecting of human nature, you will almost never find this fact mentioned—the fact that we simply do not remember our deeper questions in the mist of our lives, and therefore never really do what we know to be good, except when we are shaken by a crisis into a deeper state of self-presence. He goes on, I could have made them remember—at least I could have made many more of them remember—by causing them to fear the consequences if they did not try it....But that would have evoked in them fear, which the exercise was designed to help them wake up to in the midst of their everyday lives.*

So, what do we take away from this story? Notice that Needleman offered this exercise without the pressure of a grade. Were he to have made it mandatory for his class and to have given grades for the exercise, Needleman would have expected that most of his students would have remembered. But they also would have been shaped by the **fear of being judged** and of being found lacking.

And so I ask this congregation this morning; Who among us today ever remembers Jesus threatening his disciples, of ever threatening them with consequences if they failed and did not succeed? Do you have any recollection of Jesus ever threatening his disciples or the crowds into doing good? Is this the way to create faithful, believing, righteous Christians? We know that there are many within the Christian tradition who believe (or have heard it preached or said) that if they fail to live the life of Jesus, they will be forever consigned to hell. Have you ever, (ever!) heard that in this church? Would you want to hear such a statement in this church?

I remind us that Christ & Holy Trinity is not a community of the pure, nor of the righteous. There are many people in this world who, if they believe there is a God, that they can “get to heaven” by living and following good life. Jesus does not tell us how to live so we can merit salvation. Rather Jesus has come into the world to forgive us. We are saved not by what we do and don’t do, but through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I remind us that God’s grace does not come to those who “morally outperform” others, but to those who are willing and able to admit their failure and to acknowledge their need of a Savior. Unfortunately there have been some among us and there are some among us today who trust in their own powers (of judgment and forgiveness) more than God’s. We are, and ever shall be, a community of the fallen. We are also those who know our need for God. So may it always be.