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Christ the King Lutheran Church
Sermon, Pentecost 5A, 2017

Zechariah 9:9-12
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

One of the lessons I learned in school at a young age was the 3 R's of protecting the environment. Can you name them? Reduce, reuse, recycle. These R's were drilled into my head as a way of forming good habits around how I consumed things. Reduce: use less. Reuse: use again. Recycle: once you're done using, dispose of the item such that it won't end up filling a landfill somewhere. Recycle it.

But I learned recently that, originally, there were in fact *five* R's of protecting the environment. We simplified from five down to three at some point. And, it's interesting to note what the two we got rid of are. The five R's are (in order): **refuse**, reduce, reuse, **repurpose**, recycle.

Refuse and repurpose.

Whereas reduce, reuse, and recycle teach us how to use things and dispose of them wisely, we're not so good at refusing things altogether. Nor do we always have the imagination and creativity to repurpose the things we do have.

Refuse and repurpose. I think that these two lost values are ones that Jesus is doing almost constantly throughout his ministry. Let's take a closer look with the today's gospel.

Jesus, addressing the crowds, takes issue with the stories people have been telling about him and his friend John (the Baptist). You see, these same crowds had felt threatened by John and by Jesus, but for different reasons. John preached a message of warning and repentance; Jesus preached forgiveness and salvation.

And, it turns out, these are messages that have always threatened (and will always threaten) the comfort and privilege of those in power.

“John came neither eating or drinking,” Jesus recalls, “and they say, ‘He has a demon.’” But then, Jesus comes eating and drinking, and these same crowds say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

You just can’t win sometimes. When John refuses alcohol and lives only on locusts and honey in the wilderness, they call him crazy. When Jesus eats and drinks whatever he wants, they publicly defame him as a drunkard and glutton!

Tell me: What stories do we tell about the people who threaten us? If John and Jesus were walking among us today, what might we call them? These men preaching God’s kingdom in the desert and in the streets, hanging with the poor, the criminal, the outcast, and those believed to be the worst of sinners?

Today we might call them...thugs? Deadbeats? Or, “Those people need help,” we may say in judgment, “they’re not making good life choices.”

Here is Jesus’ first refusal. Jesus *refuses*. You see, Jesus does not let the stories that we tell about him define who he believes himself to be. Thanks be to God that he keeps on seeking out us sinners, that he keeps on sharing bread and wine at tables. Thanks be to God that he doesn’t walk away from the cross, that he loves us all the way to the end and doesn’t let our bad, prejudicial stories deter him. Thanks be to God.

Bryan Stevenson is an accomplished lawyer whose non-profit organization – the Equal Justice Initiative – provides legal representation to prisoners who were wrongly convicted and to the poor who could not otherwise afford effective representation.

He tells a story from the beginning of his legal career of walking into a Midwestern courtroom and taking his seat before the trial began at the defense counsel’s table, as lawyers always do.

The judge came in, saw Bryan, who is a black man, and said, “Hey, you need to get out of here and wait in the hallway until your lawyer gets here; I don’t want a defendant sitting in here without their lawyer.” Stevenson then introduced himself to the judge *as* the lawyer and I imagine an awkward laughter and apology followed.

This judge’s own judgment upon walking in and seeing Stevenson, a black man, in the courtroom was formed by the many stories he had lived and heard until then. Because of the color of his skin, Stevenson was initially attached to a certain set of dangerous and harmful stories.

“Look, a glutton and a drunkard,” they said of Jesus. “Look, a criminal,” they said of Bryan Stevenson, or “Look, a criminal,” we who are white say so often say about people of color.

So Jesus refuses this. He refuses to be defined by the stories being told about him. And, more importantly, he refuses to define us as anything other than beloved children. Jesus sees our pain, sees our brokenness, sees our doubts, and says instead, “Come to me, all you that are weary and I will give you rest.” Jesus gives us a different story.

And, by giving us a different story – a truer story – Jesus performs that other forgotten R: Jesus **repurposes** us. Jesus repurposes us: he makes out of us something altogether new. He calls us to a new and different way of living. And Jesus does this by calling us to follow him.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” he says. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

“Take my yoke upon you.” For those of you who have never directed a team of oxen or horses before, a yoke is that wooden crosspiece that is fastened to the backs of oxen and then attached to the cart they are pulling.

I don't know about you, but the prospect of being yoked doesn't sound all that comforting. "No thank you, Jesus, I don't need to be repurposed in quite that way, I'm fine just as I am."

The image of being yoked to Christ sounded like our first reading from the prophet, Zechariah. Addressing a people who had been exiled from their homeland for a generation, Zechariah repurposes them, giving them a new name and a new story. He does not call them "prisoners of Babylon," as they had been, but instead "prisoners of hope."

Prisoners of hope. Yoked to Christ, given a call to follow, we are repurposed with a story of hope. It is a gift and a blessing. To be a part of the Jesus story means living into our baptisms.

But here's the thing about being repurposed into this story. When we are yoked to Christ, we end up being called into the places where Jesus so often went during his ministry. If we listen to the new story Jesus is giving us, we will be drawn into spaces where the dominant stories of our everyday lives forbid us from going.

Because remember that Jesus was accused of hanging out with sinners, with tax collectors, with prisoners and criminals. Jesus announced the kingdom of God to the poor, to the least, to the foreigner, to the orphan and the widow and the alien.

We are prisoners of hope. Not of a hope that is cheap, that glosses over the world's problems with a simple, "it will all get better." No. Rather, it is a hope that comes when we are yoked to Christ in baptism, who is our hope. And, when we're yoked to Christ, it means we go places where Christ goes. We tell different stories. We come to know people fully for who they are. We are honest about our need for a savior.

The good news is that we are prisoners of hope, and our hope is in Christ. What is our hope not in? Well, it is not in harmful stories that reduce people and the world into categories that make us feel safe, into stereotypes we understand. Nor is our hope found in worldly powers of politics and might, nor is our hope in the size of our bank accounts or accomplishments.

When we confuse the salvation of Christ with our need to be considered respectable or by not associating with the wrong crowd or by having the nicest and safest house on the block...we are not prisoners of *hope*. We are prisoners of *self*. Just...prisoners.

Jesus did not come in order to call people obsessed with securing their own salvation. Jesus came for those who knew their need for a savior: the lost, the least, the little, and the dead. Us. Each one of us. The burdens we carry, the bad stories and misplaced hopes that we cling to, Jesus tells us to lay them down.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” he says. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

The yoke that Jesus calls us to wear binds us to a hope that calls us to bear with one another. To bear each other’s burdens. To bear each other’s pain. To pray together. To know one another in love. But first, we need to lay down those burdens we carry. In other words, we need to *refuse* them in order that Jesus might *repurpose* each one of us.

Luckily for us, Jesus kept on eating and drinking with sinners until the night in which he was betrayed. Lay your burdens down and come and eat and drink this simple food. Find forgiveness. Let go of your fears. Take upon you the yoke of Christ, which is the cross. Be repurposed for love, and follow in the way of Jesus to every people and land. This is our story. Thanks be to God. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

First Reading/WORD

We're going through the liturgy – the order of things that we do in worship each Sunday, that Christians have been doing for hundreds and hundreds of years. We just finished the GATHERING part.

Now we do something very important...we listen to the story of our faith.

Do any of you have favorite stories or books that you have read?

Here is a stack of just a few I've read as a new parent...what do these stories say?

THE BIBLE...we listen to the story

Here's a stack of Bibles...we have all of these different versions, translations, but they tell the same story.

It's the story of God's love for us. The story of how we were created, of how over and over again we forget about God but God never forgets about us. The story of Jesus, of Jesus teaching us to love. The story of our journey from death to new life with God. *Everything* is in this book!

Even the part of the story we just heard is really cool...this prophet named Zechariah was talking to all of his friends, his whole community, who had for many years been kicked out of their homeland and made prisoners of another people. Finally, the day had arrived for them to return home. Zechariah reminds them of the story of their faith. He says, "You know, we need to be sure to have a king this time who is *humble*, who isn't cruel and cares only about money and doesn't know God. We need a king who will come in riding on a donkey! We need a king who wants peace. No more fighting."

And then Zechariah calls them "prisoners of hope." He reminds them of the hope they have in God, and in one another. He reminds them they are not prisoners as they have been, but they are free. They are free to hope.

It's a cool story. And now we're going to hear another part of it. The GOSPEL, which we'll talk more about next week.