

Sermon for Grand Canyon Presbytery Meeting  
Fountain Hills Presbyterian Church, November 12, 2005 by Rev. Jan Flaaten

Philippians 2:1-11  
Matthew 22:34-40

During the last 3 ½ years I have come to know many congregations and many people in this Presbytery and the Synod, people I would not have known had I not assumed this position. What I have witnessed is that you have a commitment to justice, to on-going and open and serious Biblical interpretation, to making our cities and entire state a place where children and families of all sorts can thrive; you have a commitment to serving the good news of God in Christ, and I am glad to serve along side you. Serving in a parish does not, as you know, automatically make you ecumenical, does not drive you to seek out other Christian churches to do ministry. We have to be lead, encouraged, cajoled, teased, manhandled, bribed, and made to feel guilty. But once we leave the comfort-circles of our own congregations and denomination we say, "Well, of course. That was a good thing to do."

It's a good thing for me to stand here and speak the Word of God to you and that's what I wish to do, so I will save my comments about the Arizona Ecumenical Council until after the service, during the Forum.

For those of you who use the lectionary for your Sunday worship, you know that we are in that interesting bridge time of the Church year when we hear talk about Jesus coming back to end of the world, and then stirring sermons from John the Baptist, leading us into a time of hope called Advent. It's a time when we have to use the triple-tense: Jesus came long ago; Jesus comes today; Jesus will come again at the end of time. While we wait in the present and look out to an uncertain future, we remember how people of God waited 2,000 years ago. We live in that in-between time, the time of keeping ready, of staying awake, of being diligent, because we don't know. We don't know. Except Pat Robertson

And when Pat Robertson opened his mouth again this week, I said, "It's time Jesus. It's time to wrap this whole thing up." Between Robertson's calls for assassination and telling people that God won't help them in disaster if they vote against "Intelligent Design" I truly despair. Not because a preacher said something stupid (that's happened before), but because it was all over the TV. And people look at that and that's what they see as the public face of the Church. People outside the Church, people who haven't gotten to know us or know our faith, see a Church of unintelligent design, a Church filled with divisiveness, condemnation, exclusion, and mean-spiritedness. Is that what we want the world to see?

So there are days, and you may have some too, when I feel despair about the state of the world and the state of the Church and hoping Jesus would come back real soon. Our country is so polarized, our society is in a culture war, values are battling it out, and even the Church is fighting. Everyone wants to be right, and some people know they are right. Just to give you an example: I sent out an e-mail from our office encouraging people to ask a certain senator to investigate whether prisoners were being tortured, assuming that even though we don't all agree on the Iraq war, we could at least say that as people of faith we don't want to have people tortured in our name. I was wrong and I had many e-mail replies that told me so. So when some people in the Church work for peace, and other people in the Church approve torture, you can understand that this ecumenical enterprise is not always on a steady course.

But I am also a person of hope. I hope you are too. I believe that God is working out something new and wonderful, right now, even though we can't see it. I know that through the anguish, the worries, and the disappointments God's grace will again and again keep our eyes looking out ahead, and when I heard some of the stories of faith that came out of the tragedy in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, all I could do was stop and give thanks.

So here we are in the "tween" time, and what should we do. How do we live? How do we witness? I chose these two texts from Philippians and Matthew because they speak about that, our unity and the manner of our life together.

When St. Paul was writing to the Philippians he was writing a happy letter. He didn't need to scold, or correct, in the same way he did to the Corinthians or Galatians, because he heard that they were walking the walk. They were creating a community that made his heart glad.

But you can never take unity for granted. The momentum is seldom towards unity, it is usually to separation, distinction, competition. So in the midst of this happy letter, when Paul himself reflects on whether it would be better to keep on working or dying to be with God, he tells them to be of the same mind. Have the same love. Be of one accord. Don't count yourself better than others. In fact have the same mind as Jesus who gave up his glory to be a servant, even to death. That's love.

Which prompts me to look at the gospel story, where Jesus was being tested by a Pharisee lawyer about the greatest commandment. The test was picking one out of all the 613 laws from the Torah that an observant Jew followed. They're all important. But Jesus answered with a two-commandment commandment. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. And he said all the commandments, all that God is asking, fits under those two commandments: love God, love neighbor.

And you can't have one without the other. You can't just love God—love of neighbor comes with that. And when we read other things Jesus said, and other stories from the Bible who is the neighbor?

The foreigner  
 the half-breed  
 the stranger  
 the widow  
 the orphan  
 the immigrant  
 the marginalized  
 the prostitute  
 the leper  
 the unbeliever  
 the enemy.

They are the objects of our love and compassion because they are the objects of God's love and compassion. God so loved the world, the whole world, the cosmos, all the creation. Jesus' complaint against the Pharisees was not that they disobeyed any one of the 613 laws. Jesus' complaint against the Pharisees was that they lacked compassion—they had no love for the neighbor, which made people wonder if they really had love for God.

And the Pharisees still are among us. The Pharisees are still within us. But so is Jesus, who shows us the heart of God. St. Paul says, be like Jesus and show everyone around you the heart of God. So we come together in prayer and worship and song to hear again the sweet song of grace and mercy. We share in a holy meal. We offer each other the sign of peace. We

deliberate on matters of the day. And all of it with love for God and for each other and for the world.

That's God's gift to us and I need to hear that again and again. I need to see it again and again in my brothers and sisters.

We want our lives to be shaped by hope, by love, by forgiveness, by humility, by grace. We want to live into the name we have been called, children of God.

There's an ecumenical echo that I hear throughout the church—how can we grow? How can we bring more people to the Church, to Christ? Being nice is not enough. Being tolerant is not enough. We have to love as Christ loved, and that takes courage, and a lot of prayer, and a lot of thought.

And don't think that I can waltz in here, say a few things, and waltz out again. My office is just down the sidewalk from Ken's office. We are on this journey together. Christ has grabbed our hearts, and called us out to be people of God together. And one of the ways we can incarnate that love is to pray with, and march with, and worship with, and stand together with, and cry with, and laugh with all who claim the name of Christ. Together. Then the world will see and believe.

Amen.