

Servant Sunday Introduction

Last week, Sardis Baptist Church celebrated World Communion Sunday. We believe that a table can change the world. When this congregation partakes in the Eucharist, we imagine a table with wheels, one not bound within the walls of this room, but rather one determined to stretch to the furthest limits of the earth. And our sincere hope is that in both offering and receiving the hospitality of this table, we might become people, who like the Christ, lived with a sense of empathy and compassion for every neighbor. It's fitting then, that today, we would hear from five ministry partners in Charlotte who have put wheels on their tables, who offer tangible doses of empathy and compassion to their neighbors, and who remind us that God is present and active and working in the world.

Keith and Adam and Ally and Tina and Katie and Matt, we want you to know how grateful we are for the work that your organizations do. And we know it might be a little strange to come to something called *Servant Sunday*. But as a congregation, we just wanted to say thanks. We are going to continue to offer you our gratitude with our time and talents and tithes. But today, we also want to offer you our prayers. Each of your organizations has set ambitious, even audacious goals for bringing about dignity, equity, and justice in the world. And we know that such a pursuit is not always easy – in fact, it can be painstakingly slow, and exhausting at times. So in those uphill moments, we want you to know that we are praying for you, and pulling for you, and that we are proud of you. And after we thank you properly, and hug you properly, we're also gonna feed you Sardis-style. And if ever you need an oasis, the doors at 5811 Sardis Road are always, always open.

This morning, we want to welcome five organizations and their representatives:

Keith Dixon, Baptist Retirement Homes
Adam Cline, Crisis Assistance
Ally Wilson, Habitat for Humanity
Tina Postel, Loaves and Fishes
Katie Church, Urban Ministry Center

For the work of our ministry partners, we say, "Thanks be to God!"

Puppy Dogs and Sunshine A Homily for Sardis Baptist Church Bob Stillerman Servant Sunday, 10-8-2017 Psalm 19

In the first part of our lection, the Psalmist tells us that God's creation has the ability to speak without words. And it's so true! Yesterday, we had an animal blessing. And if you watched any of the puppy dogs, or the rabbit, or even the baby squirrel, each of them heard God's creation.

Every blade of grass cried out to them, "Look at me, look at me, hey, look at me, I am glorious, and luxurious, and soooo soft." And those dogs rolled in that grass, and sniffed, and chewed, and probably did other things, too! And those puppy dogs noticed the birds chirping, and they enjoyed the warm sun on their backs, and the raindrops that licked their fur, and the aroma of the flowers and plants, and they

chased after sticks and balls, and they greeted all of their other friends (animals and humans) with affectionate, welcoming barks.

It seems to me that each of them were shouting a collective “Wow!!!” It’s as if they woke up and said, “We live in God’s world, and it’s singing to us, and buddy, you better believe, we’re gonna sing back.”

The Psalmist tells us that God’s creation is a reflection of a loving, beautiful, accepting, creative, boundless, energetic God. And it’s a demonstration of every element working in sync – each with its own purpose, each with its own gifts to share. And just like you and me, God’s creation praises its maker with singing and dancing of its own.

In verse seven, the Psalmist switches gears. And the back half of our lection tells us that like creation, Torah, or the Law of the Lord, has its purpose, too.

I’m paraphrasing about three-quarters of our most important Scriptures, but if we choose to be a covenant people, I think it means we are a people determined to do two things: 1) to praise our maker with our whole being and 2) to sew empathy and compassion for others. Today. And tomorrow. And the next day. And the next.

Now friends, I know this has been a tumultuous month, and an even more tumultuous week. Hurricanes and earthquakes and threats of war and a gunman in Las Vegas. And I have a feeling some of you might say, “Hey Bob, pardon us, but we’re not really in the mood to hear a sermon about puppy dogs and sunshine and praising God and the importance of prayer. Because quite frankly, we’re not sure it’s the time or the place. And quite frankly, we’re not sure it does a whole lot of good in the face of such palpable and constant evil. We’re gonna do more than pray. We’re gonna write letters, and vote in new leaders, and finally pass legislation that matters.”

Let me say I applaud your activism. And I applaud your desire to make impactful change. But as you choose this path, please do so because of your faith, not in spite of it.

I don’t believe that Jesus ever promised an end to evil. Instead, he proclaimed that the presence of God would never absent, even in the midst of evil. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

I also don’t believe that Jesus promised a Kingdom of God that would wash over us like a tsunami. Instead, he proclaimed series upon series of kingdom moments – a world that would exist as we worked hour by precious hour to make it so.

So on Sundays (or any other day), when we pause to praise our maker, and pray earnestly for the help She offers; when we take time to notice creation working in tandem, it matters.

I think it matters because when we praise our maker, we become just like those puppy dogs who notice all there is to love, and take time show that love to all they encounter. And that empathy is contagious, one relationship at a time. Jesus offered it to a few dozen close friends, and two thousand years later, it’s still being payed forward.

And despite living in a county where 1 in 4 children are food insufficient, and where thousands upon thousands seek affordable housing, and where too many older adults lack basic necessities, there are

women and men among us, covenant people, who undergirded in covenant living, believe they can change that. Right now. And they're gonna!

And I believe that if we live as covenant people, our empathy and compassion will become so contagious, that one day soon, the world will be filled with so much love that children will be fed, and older adults will be loved, and homeless families will know what it's like to have shelter. And people will no longer need to find their self-esteem in the barrel of an automatic rifle, or in the coffers of wealthy lobbyists, or from the zip code on their ID. But rather, they will find it from the source that has never been absent: an affirming, loving, seeking, joyful Maker.

Friends, may we praise our Maker and live in the joy of Torah all of our days!

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Amen.

Dedication of Paver Stones and Acknowledgement of Ministry Partners

Servant Sunday

10/8/2017

Bob:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Jonathan:

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

Hilary:

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

Bob:

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Jonathan:

Today, we give thanks for five agencies that have noticed the least of these:

Hilary:

Baptist Retirement Homes of North Carolina seeks to offer hope and dignity to older adults

Bob:

Crisis Assistance offers a helping hand to neighbors who need help now.

Jonathan:

Habitat for Humanity has worked to provide sustainable housing for families around the world.

Hilary:

Loaves and Fishes has helped hungry families find the food they need.

Bob:

Urban Ministry Center continues the work of ending chronic homelessness, and helping Charlotte make Room in the Inn.

Jonathan:

Collectively, these five institutions are an extension of the Church in the world. And today, the congregation of Sardis Baptist Church wants to formally acknowledge their efforts to make God's love apparent for neighbors near and far.

Hilary:

Today, we have placed pavers in our Labyrinth and Sacred Garden to honor their work, and to remind each of us of God's audacious hope for humanity.

Presentation of Certificates and Blessed Chocolate Hands.

Benediction

May God's spirit swirl all around you
And leave you with a grin
And may that grin turn into a simile
And may that smile turn into an act of kindness
And together, we will be a chorus of love
Empowered to be the hands of Christ in our community
Good friends, go now with God's blessing, and in God's peace
Amen