

Words for the Journey
Bob Stillerman
Homily for Sardis Baptist Church
4-28-2019
Micah 6:6-8
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I close my eyes. And I imagine it's 2034. And our little girls and our little boys aren't so little anymore. But the church grounds look fantastic, because of so many strong and energetic helpers. And don't worry, Pastor J-Swizz still has great hair (the best in the business!), and he and Hilary are excited about their 18th Unidiversity trip in a row. And I see Jim and Danny and Howell out of the corner of my eye – they're still up on the roof cleaning out the gutters. Tillie's back for her second stint as Pastor Emerita, having recently retired from a successful decade in politics; she really was the obvious choice to be our first female president. Kathryn was her campaign manager, Betty handled the community organizing, and Susan and Janette were in charge of PR. Marge, Melissa and John Simpson headed up the security detail. The Adult Sunday School class is still meeting – this month they're reading through Tim's tenth book: *Midrash: Back to My Roots*. And somehow, somehow that hideous plant in the staff office is still alive. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

And I have this image of Leilana. She's at that age where she and her peers ask questions about the nature, and even the existence of God. "What do you think, Leilana?" her friends ask her. "Is there a God, and if so, how can you be so sure?"

"Yes," Leilana says. "Yes, I believe there's a God. And she's good, really good."

"And how do you know such a thing?" her friends ask.

"Because the people at Sardis Baptist Church told me it was so. And then, they showed me it was so, too. My whole life, they have been witness to a good God, who loves me, and who loves you, and who longs for the world to reflect such love."

Friends of Sardis, we aren't participating in a transaction this morning. Our liturgy, and that oil, and our expression of love didn't magically unlock salvation or justification for Leilana's soul. Her birth did that. Her very existence as a child of God gives her value and belonging and worth on this earth. And this morning, we acknowledge and bless that worth.

Ours is a tradition, in which she will be invited to discover, and to process, and to question, and to seek out her faith on her own terms. And at such time as she is able, with the freedom of her own conscience, and the willful and timely discernment of her own heart, she may choose to declare the Lordship of Christ.

Our role is pretty clear. We are to be a community that fosters a loving, affirming, open, curious, compassionate, authentic, organic environment, where she is empowered to become the remarkable woman we all know she will be. And make no mistake, this little Byrd is REMARKABLE!!!

Our second passage this morning emphasizes the urgency of our task – it's our responsibility to help tell Leilana, and all of our children about this good God of ours.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Now some of that language might be a little intense. I'm not suggesting that we Sharpie love commands on our forehead, or staple the Ten Commandments to our shirt. But we don't have to be so subtle in sharing the love of God.

When you shake your tambourine each week and sing *Halle, Halle, Halle*, you keep God's words. When you speak aloud and listen intently for prayer requests of those whom you know, and those whom you don't, you speak God's words. When you pass Christ's peace; when you chaperone a youth event; when you volunteer in worship care; when you add cans to the food bin or toothpaste for the Migrant Assistance program; when you spend a little extra time to make that cobbler just right (thanks Magay!); when you sing aloud; when you show up; when you listen; when you do all the little things to show people they matter...you keep God's words.

And it's these examples, and this kind of repetition, and this kind of consistency that we commit to today. We are committing to showing Leilana God in her midst, over and over and over again. And the truth is, if we're doing this right, we're not setting her up for a lightning-strike-kind-of-recognition of the divine. We're setting her up for divine intuition in a manner similar to comprehending familial love, or language, or friendship. It becomes something you just know, because it's always been a part of you.

God says, "Don't get bogged down in lofty sacrifices, just do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly."

We promise you, Leilana, we're gonna show you how to do that.

And God says, "Love Me. With your all your heart. And with all your soul. And with all your might."

We promise you, Leilana, we're gonna love you with ALL we have.

And when 2034 comes along, maybe Tillie won't be a former president. And maybe Susan will steal the ladder to keep the Three Musketeers from climbing it. But two things are certain: Jonathan will still have great hair. And more importantly, Leilana will have seen the love of God and love for her in this place.

May it be so! Amen.