

Sermon March 17th, 2019

God's Healing and Saving Love Prevails

In our gospel this morning, Jesus faces fierce opposition. Some people don't like how he heals people on the Sabbath. Others don't like that his preaching states that God's healing and saving love is for everyone. Including those who are perceived as unclean. The Empire and religious leaders don't like his claim to be a king/messiah or his harsh challenges towards their teachings. In fact, throughout Jesus' ministry he faces opposition, which eventually leads to Golgotha where he will hang from a cross for his words and deeds.

When I reflect on all the opposition Jesus faces as he tries to impact people's lives with God's healing and saving love. I think of all the opposition, both inner and outer, we face when trying to imitate Jesus in our lives.

For example, our doubts. How often do we avoid participating in a ministry, because we doubt our own abilities to perform the task we are called to do? I remember having an opportunity to lead my home congregation's youth group. I felt that God was calling me to this ministry, but I kept making excuses. I doubted my own ability to take on this leadership role. I didn't end up being the youth leader at my church.

In my time as a pastor I have come across many people who doubt themselves when asked if they could help lead a ministry. Sometimes they feel like they don't have proper training. Or they feel like they don't have the right personality characteristics to be a good leader. Or they doubt whether they have the ability to give the time needed to complete the tasks at hand.

Sometimes we doubt whether God will answer our prayers or whether a story in the bible can actually impact our lives. Have you ever decided not to pray for something, because you doubted whether God would answer you? Do you wrestle to pick up your bible, because you doubt the impact these stories may have on your life?

Sometimes we doubt whether God will provide for our needs. Making it harder for us to give to those in need. Making us cling tighter to what we have fearing that we could lose it all.

Sometimes we doubt whether God is calling us to a particular ministry, because this ministry is challenging us to step outside our comfort zone. Maybe inviting us to reach out to people we fear or don't understand.

Doubt can become one of the greatest oppositions we face as we try to imitate Christ in our lives.

Another example of an inner opposition we face is our desires. Sometimes we desire something different than what God has in store for our lives. Sometimes these desires are so overpowering that we start to separate ourselves from all those things that point us back to Christ.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians Paul is encouraging the believers to continue to imitate Christ in their lives even though they are facing persecution. Even though they are facing opposition from the Empire. Opposition from the people around them.

How often do we face persecution when trying to imitate God's healing and saving love in our world? Maybe a friend doesn't like you sharing your faith or a person has a negative view towards your faith tradition and starts persecuting you just for being a Christian. Just this week Muslim friends in New Zealand were killed for being Muslim. For believing in their faith tradition. In February some of our Jewish friends faced a similar fate. Persecution is something we face across religious communities as we try to imitate God's healing and saving love in our world.

Another example of an outer opposition we face is people's unrealistic expectations of us. How often do we feel so overwhelmed when trying to live up to the expectations of others? We end up shutting down. We stop volunteering for a specific ministry. Or we fall into a shame and guilt cycle feeling inadequate to live out the practices of our faith.

Maybe you miss worship a few Sundays in a row and feel like you are not being a good enough Christian. Aren't Christians supposed to be in church every week? You start to feel guilt that then turns to shame that then leads to missing more Sundays, because you start to feel unworthy.

We can feel the same way when we feel like we don't pray enough or we don't read our bibles enough or we don't give enough.

So, like Jesus we too face a lot of opposition when trying to live our lives as God wants us to live.

Yet, we see that Jesus perseveres. He will not stop healing and saving people from their pain. Even if it means hanging from a cross at Golgotha. Jesus understands his purpose and knows that he will get the support he needs to follow through.

Like Jesus, we too are given what we need to persevere. And it starts with the gracious promise that God loves us as we are. God is forgiving and gracious. And is about lifting us up. Not shaming us. When we believe that God loves us and will not turn away from us then we feel that we can face the oppositions in our lives with hope. Knowing that even when we fall short, we will not be defeated. Even though we experience a tragic event in New Zealand, hatred and violence will not overcome us. Even though we may even hang from a cross. Not even death will hold us down.

We are given people in our lives who support us along the way. People who lift us up when we feel down. People who mentor us into imitating Christ in our lives. People who love us no matter what. We are called to worship not only for God, but also to connect to one another supporting one another as we face this opposition.

We are given opportunities to pray reassuring us of God's presence as we face these oppositions. Jesus falls to his knees in prayer in the garden before his arrest. We are given the scriptures that point us to stories where others before us were lifted up by God and given the strength and hope needed to face their opposition.

We are not alone when we face opposition, and this gives us hope that God's healing and saving love will always impact our lives and the lives of others no matter how strong the opposition may feel.

Let us pray, loving God, thank you for lifting us up to face our opposition. We pray especially for our Muslim friends who have been impacted by the tragedy in New Zealand. May we continue to be your healing hands and preach your saving and redemptive words to all we encounter. In Jesus name we pray. **Amen.**