



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

April 28, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

To prove the Calvary pulpit is open to a diversity of theological viewpoints, I thought I'd contradict something today that I preached four weeks ago, on Easter Sunday. I'm sure most of you remember the sermon vividly, but for those who might have missed it, in the third paragraph I said, "I think we should be wary of the way some Christians ... have understood the death and resurrection of Jesus as settling an account with God for our sins." Today, I'm confessing my affection for the old gospel hymn "The Old Account."

Do you know it? My rudimentary skills on the guitar and mandolin are pretty rusty. But that I can play at all is thanks largely to my late Uncle Stewart, who first invited me to strum along with a few of his friends in the living room of Gary and Mary Ann Guinn nearly 40 years ago.

The circle included two guys named Phil. One was a fine musician who pastored the First Methodist Church in town, and the other was an ophthalmologist who played upright bass with the group until he moved away for seminary himself to become a Lutheran minister. Gary was a college English prof who played lap dulcimer and his wife Mary Ann was a nurse learning the fiddle. Uncle Stewart, who was a banker at the time, wasn't the best musician in the room, but he was the largest personality so he was their front man when the group played church picnics or Rotary Club fundraisers. I don't know why I felt the need to tell you these people's professions, except perhaps to flesh out the context for my nostalgic fondness for the song.

They'd play bluegrass and Beatles tunes, maybe an Irish jig or a gospel hymn or two. And at some point on many of those evenings, Stewart would call

for “The Old Account,” and belt out, “There was a time on earth when in the book of heaven/ An old account was standing for sinning unforgiven/ My name was at the top and many things below/ But I went to the keeper and I settled, settled long ago...”

After several verses elaborating the particular failures that filled up the narrator’s column in that heavenly ledger of sin, we’d all lay down our instruments and take another pass through the chorus, a cappella: “Long ago (down on my knees) long ago (I settled it all)/ Yes the old account was settled long ago (hallelujah)/ And the record’s clear today for he washed my sins away/ And the old account was settled long ago.” The harmonies weren’t nearly as tight as the Calvary choir’s. But, at least as it rings in my memory, I wouldn’t change a syllable or a note.

This might be a good time for Walt Whitman to enter the sermon, roaring, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” It’s probably more appropriate to say, “The old preacher’s clearly going soft in the head, bless his heart.” But all week I’ve been thinking about these lines of scripture that I — like many of you, I’m guessing — have probably read hundreds of times: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

What does that mean? Really. What might it look like if all of the sustaining energy in your life and mine were to come directly from the life of Jesus? So much so that if we were to lose contact with his life, we’d wither? Just as crucially, what is the essential, life giving energy of Jesus?

I think that music circle must have come to mind because, even if your singing voice isn’t fit for so much as the shower, to be in a room of singing people is to be quite literally vibrating with a particular energy that’s difficult to

explain but that has presumably existed in some form in every human culture that ever existed.

It's true that energy can pass between people by way of concepts and ideas. In the form of doctrines and tenets. But that doesn't seem to be the kind of energy Jesus meant when he chose the metaphor of nutrients and moisture making their life-giving way up from the earth through a vine and off into its branches, wouldn't you agree? I don't think he would have taught in this way if the takeaway was, "I need you to hold more accurate ideas about a few things in your heads."

One commentator on the passage noted that Jesus's choice of a grapevine rather than a fruit tree is of interest. A vine's branches are essentially just more vines. It's easy enough to see where a tree limb meets its trunk. Grapevines are more like entanglements of branches. Not to overthink the metaphor too much, but the image of Jesus's sustaining life being entangled completely with ours adds to the energy conveyed in the teaching.

And we are bombarded constantly with energies, are we not? Love and joy are infectious, as are fear and vitriol and resentment and judgment. How do we recognize our meaningful attachment to and entanglement with the life of Jesus, especially since there have always been all sorts of people shouting that they're the real Christians. That they're the true followers of the risen Christ. Jesus himself said that not everyone who drops his name actually knows him.

Well, here's one sinner's take. The concern of that Easter sermon a few weeks ago was that when our vision of God is as someone who is constantly counting up where we've each gone wrong, that's simply not how love acts. We know this. When we're in sin counting mode, our mindset is the polar opposite of a loving one, whether the sins are our neighbor's, our enemy's, or our own. I think that old hymn hits me just so because the old account in a big book in heaven is mostly a prop. Its pages got filled out meticulously only so that we can glimpse of what it looks like or feels like to suddenly realize that

Jesus has torn them all out. Because, like every smitten lover that ever was, he isn't preoccupied with the flaws of his beloved. It's all of you he loves. It's you he wants to set free from everything we fill up the sin ledgers in our minds with, because our sins are not the essence of who we are. Not in the eyes of God.

You have one of those ledgers, don't you? I know I have a handful of special failures that can come suddenly to mind in a moment and command my full attention, convincing me of my unworthiness. That hurtful comment or thoughtless cruelty you wish you could take back. The harsh settling of an account with someone that felt like justice until we carried it out. Then we saw it for the petty vengeance it was. Truth be told, many of us don't need God to be keeping score. We do a pretty careful job of it ourselves.

It might surprise my kids to hear that I sat through even more hours of my dad's sermons than they did of theirs. The key variable here is that Dad preached for forty minutes or so and my sermons usually clock in at around twelve. I know, they feel like forty but I've checked the record. Anyway, like my kids, I've forgotten most of those sermons. But there's an insight from one from my childhood on Psalm 103 that I still think of regularly. That's the psalm that promises God removes our transgressions from us, "as far as the east is from the west." It's a beautiful image of the length and breadth of divine grace. It's one of many in the Hebrew Scriptures, by the way. Jesus didn't invent the concept, you know. What Dad added is that the almost infinite distance between east and west evaporates the moment you simply turn around. God has cast our sins away as far as distance itself, but they're just over our shoulders if they're what we decide to turn and give our attention to. If they're energy is what we decide should animate our lives.

This doesn't mean taking sin lightly. The nonchalant mention of a wilderness road to Gaza in our reading from Acts was a jarring reminder of how unresolved sins can fester and grow tragically through whole civilizations over centuries. It also doesn't mean never seeing that what the enlivening energy of Jesus's forgiveness requires in us in a moment might be repentance, or grief, or even guilt about having hurt someone he also loves, someone he also wants

to be a branch tapped into and entangled, not with its sins, but with the vine of his redeeming love as if its life depends entirely upon it. Because it does.

More than 600 years ago William Langland wrote, "All the wickedness in the world that man might work or think is no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped into the sea." Don't you think what Jesus could still be asking us — through stories about vines and branches, and maybe even in grateful songs about settled accounts, if you have an ear for them — is what it might mean for this wounded world he so loves, if you can I would learn every day a little more deeply what it means to live lives sustained by the energy, not of that burning coal, but of that vast and merciful sea?