

2.13.22 –Epiphany 6 – Valentines’ weekend “Clear the Decks for Love”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

1 Peter 4:1-11 (NIV) ~ Pam

Living for God

¹ Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. ² As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. ³ For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴ They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵ But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

⁷ The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. ⁸ Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹ Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

L: These are Uncompromising Words from God! C: Thanks be to God.

James 1:22-27 (NLT) ~ Pam

²² But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. ²³ For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. ²⁴ You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. ²⁵ But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

²⁶ If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

L: These are Demanding Words of God! C: Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me:

Lord, our minds are concerned with potential war, excessive violence, bad weather, sports, inflation, and our friends not here today. Clear our minds and hearts as I washed my hands before your altar. We leave our busy thoughts there in the basin. Let us feel your presence and hear your voice in the words spoken now. Help us to live daily with holy intentions, listening for your direction. May those at home today

feel your presence, assurance, and our love wherever they are. Lord, speak now through your messenger. **“Amen.”**

So, did you practice any silence last week? I may ask you a few more times, so see if you can get up to 2 minutes this week with no noise, just you and God. Let me know how that goes.

Happy Valentine’s Day! I hope you have something nice planned with a loved one or just for yourself! Chocolate, a nice dinner, or flowers are not in vain, but represent God’s blessings and care! You can also show your love for others in need by bringing more non-perishables for our Souper Bowl of Caring month. Thank you for what you brought last week and today!

Valentine’s Day for believers is another chance to love others like Christ loves us. Giving up old unhealthy habits, evil desires, lust, lying, cheating, stealing, gossip, envy and all manner of sin is to commit or re-commit ourselves to God and to receive the enduring love of Jesus. Not the Hallmark type of Valentine’s Day, but still a day to reconsider what love means.

Peter tells the persecuted believers to deal with suffering with the same courage Christ demonstrated at the cross. That courage and love permits forgiveness; and forgiveness is required for love. Giving up past lives allows us to live in the present with God directing our new steps so that we may be dead to sin. He is writing to both lax Jews and new Gentile believers, whose lifestyles were far from Christlike. “Clearing the Decks” in our own lives makes room for both a Christlike attitude of agape love and a desire to humbly serve others. This deep love for others, even strangers, “covers a multitude of sins.”

This deeper love also clears the way for our natural God-given spiritual gifts to surface and be put to use for the Kingdom. Peter mentions hospitality, important to the fleeing Christians who needed places to stay. It is also important today, not for entertaining, but for assisting the under or unemployed, the poor, and the un-housed. As we begin to “Listen for the Work” that God will reveal to us, please think, and feel His guidance in the context of your spiritual gifts we named last Fall. Each gift (“*charism*”) is to be used in service, like being a steward. How many of you have ever been on a cruise? The steward makes sure your needs are met; they are responsible for us getting to meals, lifeboats, finding Dramamine, and helping us to navigate the ship. In Christ’s day, the steward was more like a house manager, dealing with staff, finances, and resources.

Now, think of the word “steward” from a community-forming point of view. A faith strong enough to withstand suffering must come from mutual support of the community, prayer, generosity, stewardship, and sharing one another’s suffering, strengths, and spiritual gifts. Today, I washed my hands before the message, not for COVID cleanliness, but to **symbolize** letting go of past no-longer-helpful habits or items; we have been slowly clearing the decks of closets and cabinets stuffed with unnecessary documents (10+ year old minor invoices and offering envelopes stored away unseen and never shredded), broken furniture, 1995 outdated pastor journals, and a broken microphone cable. Some of this has been helpful to me, but mostly, stewarding what’s in our “house” makes room for grieving the past that was and making room for the energy and life that is to come! We do this at home, why not in God’s

house? How can we hear God's voice clearly if we are full of dust-covered memories? Even Carlsbad Caverns delicately brushes away lint and residue of years of visitors so the dust will not absorb moisture and decay the cavern elements. I do respect our past and legacy, but I also hear God pointing us onward so that in all we do here, ***God gets the glory***, not our predecessors.

Last week's key verse you might recall was: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to be angry (James 1:19b)." This formula brings about the righteous, holy life God desires. Verse 21 right before today's James reading also calls us to clean house, spiritually, that is, and perhaps physically too, to remove excess possessions bought in haste, vanity, or envy. Only by living simply and adopting the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude can we absorb God's saving Word through the Scriptures. I hope you tried "Praying the Scriptures" last week.

Listening Prayer is only effective if during the silence we clear our minds of the busy thoughts running amok (lists, aches, pains, woulda-coulda-shoulda's, insecurities). We do that by handing those off to God. Clearing your minds is not like the Eastern yoga ritual of meditation; rather for believers, it is a meditation where **we lay our thoughts at the altar for God's healing and restoration** of our relationship with Him. Let's try another tool, Breath Prayer:

1. Take everything off your lap, uncross ankles, and place your feet firmly on the floor, and if you can, rest your back against the pew.
2. Take a slow breath in through your nose to the count of four: 1-2-3-4.
3. Now hold your breath for another count of four: 1-2-3-4.

4. Lastly, slowly exhale through your mouth to a count of four: 1-2-3-4. Yes, it's tricky with masks on, but you can repeat this at home without a mask. Let's try it again, so you get the muscle memory. **In:** 1-2-3-4, **Hold:** 1-2-3-4, **Out:** 1-2-3-4. At home, if you do that in 5 sets, or as many as you can, your brain will be calm and ready for silence; you will be ready to hear God speak to you in your mind and heart.

Washing hands and lighting candles are other visual and tactile rituals to clear the decks to hear and feel Christ's strength, love, and healing. Most people do not think "listening" requires any effort on our part, but it is worthy work to do. Moses and Jesus went to the mountains away from the crowds often to listen and hear from God. It is necessary for us all to practice new ways to hear God's direction; it is how we let go of any complacency and move forward to be the church and spiritual direction of our community.

First things first! This will lead to the doing James talks about. Our rituals and our worship alone do not save us! Only God's undeserved Grace is our salvation. That salvation drives us first to our knees and then to charitable service. James reminds us that that service demonstrates Christ's love to ourselves, each other, and the broader community. In Luke's Gospel, when an expert in the law challenged Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" He told the story of the Good Samaritan, where a man had been beaten and robbed; two passed him by, but the third stopped to help him. Jesus asked the expert: ³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "**Go and do likewise.**"

Did you do a heart check, an LQ (love quotient) this morning? February is heart month, and I hope we have a new definition to your Valentine's Day as well! "Clearing the Decks for Love" and Breath Prayers are other tools to help us "Listen for the Work" and prepare us spiritually for the doing of the new work to come. // **Let us pray,**

Dear Jesus, we thank you for making our communication with you as simple as ***breathing!*** Clear our lives of sin and past wounds; open us up to new direction as we trust your teaching to discern your will. Please keep us healthy and strong, so that we can continue to live out the Gospel and share it with others. In your name, we pray and abide, **Amen.**