

Micah 5:2-5

² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Romans 12:1-2

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Luke 1:39-56

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Testify to transforming love.

Hyesun, James and I first moved to New York in 1999. With my father’s help we were able to buy a cute little house in Long Island. It was barely a two-bedroom house, and had an unfinished basement and a tool shed in the back yard. It was the first house we ever owned (although the bank really owned most of it). And one of the fun things that I learned from buying a house is all the little presents that you get – things that the previous owner didn’t want to take with them, and you just sort of inherit whatever it is. I remember there was an old wooden sign that said “New York;” I think it came from one of a train station. There were all sorts of old hand tools. And one thing in particular that was left in the tool shed was a heavy duty gas-operated pruning machine. It wasn’t just one of these fishing-line weed whackers; this machine had saw blades.

But as interesting as this machine was, I never ever used it. I never tried to get the thing running, and I never used it to cut down vines or anything. And there were some serious weeds in our back yard. Bittersweet was one. Acasia was another. This tool, which was basically a gift, could have come in very handy for getting rid of those weeds, but to be honest with you, I have a fear of gas-operated hand tools with sharp exposed blades. I could have learned how to operate this tool and saved myself a lot of time and frustration in dealing with the weeds, but instead I used less powerful, less effective ways of getting rid of some of the weeds, and our garden could have been better, our yard could have looked nicer, if I had mastered this gas-operated pruning machine.

I think that my fear of this machine is the same kind of fear we often have with Holy Spirit. In the Bible we read stories of how the Holy Spirit does all sorts of wonderful things through us, and yet we see that the Spirit may be too dangerous for our liking. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, and we don’t want to spend forty days in the wilderness let alone forty MINUTES. The Spirit led Peter to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God in front of a large crowd, and we’re afraid of speaking to small crowds or even to bring up Jesus as a topic of conversation. The Spirit is too powerful and has too many sharp edges for us to feel comfortable with. And so we kind of leave the Spirit hanging in the tool shed, collecting dust and doing absolutely nothing while it could be employed literally change our landscape.

Last week we talked about **liberating** love, and we read about all the folks who were coming out to see John the Baptist – people who he called “a brood of vipers” who nonetheless willingly submitted to his baptism of repentance, people who wanted to be free from the sin that seemed to have a grip on them. And I spoke of how John mentions that Jesus is going to take them to the next level: he will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit; that’s right, the Holy Gas Operated Pruning Saw. And I mentioned that people who put their full faith in Jesus Christ are indeed liberated not only from sin and death but from fear as well. But the fact is that we don’t all experience this full liberation because we are afraid of this Holy Gas Operated Pruning Saw.

And so many of us get stuck. We may be very enthusiastic about proclaiming our salvation and our redemption through faith in Jesus Christ, but that’s as far as we’ll go. We’ll even get others to repent and take Jesus as their Savior, and we’ll sing “halleluiah” together, but how does our yard look? Are we doing anything about the bittersweet and the acasia that’s taking over the yard? Are we being truly transformed through this Holy Spirit? That’s what our topic is today: testifying to transforming love. The love that liberates us from sin and death is the same love that can transform us, reshape us, into the people that God created us to be, but

we have to start the engine of this Holy Spirit in order for that change within us to occur. It doesn't just happen by itself. Let me ask you; how many of you felt anything happen to you when you became a professing member of this church or any church? Did you have a religious experience? For me, the only thrill that I felt came from drinking wine in church for the first time; as a Methodist you don't even get *that* thrill – we use grape juice, and confirmation is not our first communion. If I asked Serena or Eric if they felt anything supernatural when they repented during their confirmation service, they would probably say, “no.” Alexis and Katelyn, I don't know if anything magical will happen when you repent and affirm your faith when you are confirmed. Many people who have grown up in the church, repented, and confessed their faith in Jesus Christ will likely tell you that nothing amazing happened to them. And if I asked what has changed in you *since* that time, how would you answer?

The point is that in order for change to occur in us, we need to will that change into being. We need to activate the power of the Holy Spirit to do what it wants to do in us and through us. And what are the things that we need to do to activate the power of the Spirit? John Wesley, our beloved founder and spiritual guide, called these activities “the means of grace.” They are not laws that we need to perform to gain credit from God, because we are already saved; rather the means of grace are things that we can do that open us up to the power of the Holy Spirit in order that change can occur in us. The means of grace are:

Works of Piety, such as:

Individual Practices--

Prayer

Fasting

Searching the Scriptures

Healthy Living

Communal Practices--

Holy Communion

Baptism

Christian Conferencing

Works of Mercy, such as:

Service focused toward individual needs-

Doing Good (Good works)

Visiting the Sick

Visiting the Imprisoned

Feeding & Clothing those in need

Earning, Saving, & Giving all one can

Service focused toward societal needs--

the Seeking of Justice.

Some of these means of grace appear to involve no danger at all – spending time in prayer, healthy living, coming to church, visiting the sick; it's usually when we get to the societal needs, the seeking of justice, where the danger comes in, because seeking justice means speaking out or acting out against injustice, and that can make us the target of the same injustice. If you provided a hiding place for Jews in Nazi-held territories, you subjected yourself to the same injustice that they would endure if they were caught. This is what Jesus calls, “Carrying the cross.” But “carrying the cross” is essential if we hope to realize this thing called the Kingdom of God.

Just as Mary agreed to carry the baby Jesus, we agree to allow the Spirit to have its way with us, knowing that there will be days of pain and trial and struggles, just as a mother knows that bearing a child involves pain and

trial and struggles. But we take on the task willingly, joyfully, in the hope and the assurance that it will all be worth it as we give birth to something amazing, that is the Kingdom of God.

The more we practice these means of grace, the more we open ourselves to God's transforming love, and the more we ourselves are transformed into Christ's image and so the more we experience life as God intended us to live, abundantly and joyfully.

Likewise as God's Holy Gas-Powered Pruning Machine works in us to transform us, to cut away at the weeds that choke our spiritual garden, the more fruit of the spirit we recognize in our lives, the fruit that Paul identifies as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And as you can clearly see, the more of this kind of fruit we bear, the more we affect those around us. "Gee, what makes Serena such a peaceful person? Why is Eric so kind to me? How can Katelyn be so patient? How did Alexis get so self-disciplined?" It happened because you started up that Holy Gas-Operated Pruning Machine that in turn chopped away at the weeds in your life and allowed you to bear fruit.

God's love is transforming love if we allow it to transform us. Take steps to activate the power of the Holy Spirit within you, not because God demands it but because God desires it, because he loves you, and he wants you to find TRUE happiness in life, happiness that no money can buy, happiness that comes not because you experience peace around you but because you find peace within you.