February 9th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Epiphany 4

10:30am

The messiness of justice, kindness, and humility

1. Annual Report

 Donna would be much to kind to tell on me, to tell you all that I was the last person to submit my report for the annual report that we will be reviewing after the service. I found it challenging, more challenging than a sermon – for the charge and the challenge of the pastor’s report is really an unattainable goal: sum up the work of the Spirit in a year. I’ll admit, I was jealous of those folks who had the chance to report the numbers, while I wrote in metaphor and theological obliqueness. How do you sum up a year – how do you begin to explain what the Spirit has been up to?

 For me, there’s much I can’t share – there’s those holy and sacred moments where I have a conversation that reaches beyond my own understanding. There are moments at the bedside, where prayers are said, and silence ushers us in. There’s moments that you probably would rather not hear about in the annual report – like when the boiler decided to have issues, or when some toilets all broke at the same time, or we had to manage the complexities of a tree limb falling. It’s part of the work, it’s actually a very important part of the work – it’s the invisible church in action, so that we get to worship this very morning in peace.

 The truth is – the work of ministry, the work of the church, is messy. It’s different from day to day and things can change on a moments notice or stay exactly the same. But rather than seeing messy as a bad thing, I would invite us to heed Nadia Bolz-Weber’s challenge, that this messiness, this living into the new, is where those moments of incredible Spirit-led movement happen. The grit may be under our fingernails, we might be cranky, we might be wrestling with our intelligible thoughts while navigating our emotional dreams. No where in Scripture does God ever promise that this life will be easy, and he especially does not promise that following as a disciple will be easy. Yes, the yoke of your burden is lightened, but there’s also other verses telling us that to follow Jesus means to leave it all behind without looking back. The life of ministry, the life of the church, the life as a follower, is indeed messy.

II. What the Annual Report is Actually About

 When writing the report, one of my draft ideas simply had the well-known Scripture of Micah 6:6-8 on it. It’s been used as a directional guide for Christians for centuries – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. Boom. You’re good. Rather than me delving into a nebulous report – maybe those lines of Scripture would have been a better solution. This is what we are called to, and year after year, though the challenge changes, the call remains the same: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.

 To do the work of justice is messy work. Often, justice involves conflict, it involves standing on the steps of your capital building while the cold air is blustering and you are hold a sign for hours, it asks you to believe that justice can happen when the world is telling you that it cannot. I’ve heard often, and sometimes I believe it myself – where is the hope in justice anymore? As you read the news, as you scroll through facebook, as you try to have conversations with people you disagree with – sometimes, often times, it’s really tempting to hide in your house and binge Netflix. Now, I’m not saying that I’ve done that...but I do have some binge worthy shows in mind if you want to connect after worship. Ahem.

 One of the encouraging works of justice I have heard about recently has been a program, which the name escapes me, but a program where 4 Israelies and 4 Palestinians sit together and have a shared meal. They agree to have this meal together, to share stories, but to not engage in political debate. And suddenly, at that dinner, the centuries of division fall apart just a little bit. Suddenly you aren’t simply from Israel or Palestine alone – you find the commonalities of family, of shared experience, of being human together. That’s justice, that’s the messy work of justice. And maybe that sounds overwhelming, because it is – but remember the words of the Talmud – loosely translated by me in meaning – it’s not your job to do all the work of justice – but it is your job to not give up either.

1. Loving Kindness

Loving kindness seems to go hand-in-hand with doing

justice. Loving kindness is messy work as well – it requires me to be loving and kind, even if I’ve had a bad day. I think Nadia puts it well in her clip – though she doesn’t call it loving kindness – but loving kindness is seeing people’s full humanity and loving kindness is reconciling when no one deserves it. Loving kindness is showing mercy when I don’t want to, and on the flip side, it’s when people show me more mercy and grace than I could ever deserve or feel worthy of. Nadia uses this phrase at the end of the clip that jives well with me, this mercy, this kindness, is about God “loving us back to life” and making us new every day through the power of grace.

1. Walking Humbly

 Walking humbly is also a messy call, because it requires us to reflect in often challenging ways. It makes us say we are sorry, even when that is hard and conflicting. Humility requires us to not flaunt when we are right – which can also be challenging, especially if we’ve had a long battle in trying to prove ourselves. Being humble requires us not to claim that we are less, that’s not the call – being humble requires us to see our own humanity and the humanity of others and strive for equality, rather than standing up on a pedestal. Humility does not tear down, it lifts up, and it acknowledges right where we are in the here and now.

1. Back to the Annual Report

 So, maybe the best way to read through your annual report is through the eyes of Micah 6:6-8 – is Springfield choosing to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly. If not, how do we need to change? If we need a measuring stick – this is probably a good one to use. It’s also worth noting, again and again, that this is messy work. Which means, in this year and the coming years, I’m going to ask you all to do messy work. Maybe we will like the work, maybe we won’t – maybe we will fly blindly but know that the Spirit is leading.

 Here’s a helpful metaphor from an artist – whenever you begin an art endeavour – whether that’s painting, or an installation, or illustration – it’s messy. Your supplies are everywhere, there’s probably glue or paint on your clothes and desk, and you just have to hope that no one is going to walk in the room during the process, because art is messy. And then it transforms, and it moves, and all the sudden all the paint and glue and wood scraps and debris get thrown away and you have this beautiful image or project before you. You go through the artist rumble, through the mess, because it leads to something more beautiful than you can imagine.

 Ministry is much of the same, it’s about getting messy, twenty projects at once, things come up at the last moment, but you know through the Spirit that in the mess, the Spirit is right there guiding us and leading us to a better image of who we can be than we could ever have given expression to. So, that is your encouragement and call – go get messy, ask what God is calling you and us to do in the here and now – and let’s do it. Let’s stand in the fact of possible failure, let’s stand in the face of unknowing, and know that God, each year, for the last 184 years in this building, God has not stopped moving and loving us. So let’s press on, into the next five years, ten years, fifteen, fifty, and beyond – fervently seeking to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly as a congregation and people all the days of our lives. Amen.