***Sermon Series: Experiencing God***

**Sermon #10: God’s Redemptive Mission**

Malachi 2:14-15 Luke 17:21 John 19:20  
Matthew 25:40 I Corinthians 12:12

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| **Slide** | **Sermon** |
| 1 | Title Slide |
| 2 | Theme: We cannot really love God if we don’t love our neighbors, especially our fellow church members.  Center has suffered from this concept for many years, especially the last 15 or so years. When I came here in 2014, the previous minister left about 5 months earlier. There were a lot of hostile, hard feelings toward others about what had happened. Many people had done hurtful things and there was much anger and bitterness. I chose not to ask about what had happened because I didn’t want to know the hurtful details and because I would only get one side of the whole story. Most from the other side had already left the church.  But here I was, appointed as pastor to Center and being asked to enter this great brokenness. I didn’t ask for this appointment but in the United Methodist system, you go where you are sent. Soon, I learned some of the suffering many had experienced from the broken relationships and from ceasing to love one another. It was understandable that people felt vindictive toward others because of the lies and misrepresentation of truths that were shared and repeated through gossip lines. |
| 3 | So, how was I to tackle this situation that I knew was there but very little of the details? I decided to preach for a year or more sermons on forgiveness, healing, accountability, and the call to love, even your enemies. I feel over these 7+ years much healing has taken place and we have demonstrated more love than hate. But 2 things still exist:   1. Some still have not forgiven many of those they were angry with during that time. 2. Center still struggles with being a loving, inclusive community.   I base these ideas that over the last 7 years Center has had many guests who visit – a Sunday or 2 or 2 months but eventually leave for other places. There still must be some of that anger and distrust lingering that those guests pick up on, at least enough that they feel like moving on even though they don’t understand it. Secondly, while I have been Center’s pastor a number of those who were angry enough to leave have returned to visit. They might come a few times but eventually decide Center is still not the place for them.  My conclusion from these experiences is that Center still has more work to do, more changes to make before we are ready to grow. |
| 4 | Our various texts today are about loving each other as a witness to God’s love among us. They say as long as we hold grudges or ill will toward others we cannot be one in mission with God if we are waging war with each other. Now I don’t see any of you waging war with each other – openly. Quite the opposite, I’ve seen Center, full of strong personalities, working hard to get through this COVID time by working together. We have not all agreed on the protocols instituted and when they were put in place and later changed and changed again. I’ve seen people pulling together even in their disagreements.  And Center and its leadership are to be commended. So, I commend you and thank you for each of you loving each other in midst of a pandemic that was waging war against us!  Now as the pandemic seems to be more on a downward spiral, we look forward to a brighter future when we can gather in ways that haven’t been possible over the last two years. |
| 5 | As we begin to open up, I must say I still see some problems not pandemic related but ones that have undercut our efforts for many years to grow Center. I am referring to how we keep up “our guards” when guests do come to our church.  We, as a whole, become very careful who we invite into our fellowship. If someone is really different from us, say in style and dress, in race, in the part of the world they grew up, then we are not sure they will fit Center’s family. Our human family at Center has its roots in an agrarian culture, middle class economically at best and socially southern country style. Even though our area has changed a lot, I think we still have that mindset. Thus guests who do not fit the culture of Center’s 200 years of ministry are either told outright or in more passive ways that they might not fit in at Center. I think one of the biggest roadblocks is the economic background of Center compared to the more affluent communities that have moved in this area. There seems to be suspicion that the affluent will use their wealth to take over Center’s leadership and Center will lose the solid foundation of its agrarian past. And that is really interesting to me knowing that some of Center’s long-time families reaching back generations have also become part of the affluent because they have sold off the very property that has been developed and opened the door to many of the affluent neighborhoods around Center. |
| 6 | The fact is the family module of a church is a Biblical one. But the difference is the church family has to be open to all who call Christ Lord & Savior and to those no matter how different or have not yet found Christ as Lord & Savior. The Biblical church family has to make room for everyone who wants to a part of it.  Now, this issue is nothing new. In the early days of the Church, the Church was seen by the disciples as a primarily Jewish culture and Jesus was finally the long-awaited savior. But as Christianity spread, Gentiles (non-Jews) discovered Jesus’ saving grace and converted to Christianity. The Christian Jews in Jerusalem were horrified that Gentiles wanted to be followers of Christ. How could they? They didn’t follow the Jewish practices. They were not circumcised. The Jewish Christians were so concerned about this that they sent Peter and some others to the Gentile “Christians”. The story is told in Acts 10 & 11 where Peter witnesses the Holy Spirit breaking out on Roman gentiles and they are converted. Peter’s dreams help him understand that God wants Jews and Gentiles in the Church. Peter then addresses the Church leaders in Jerusalem. They had to agree that since God had given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit and led them to repentance and new life, how could the Jewish leaders disagree? They decided it is not required to become a Jew before converting to Christianity. |
| 7 | Now, this is just one example of how God intends the Church family to have room for everyone who repents and believes in Jesus as Lord & Savior. Over and over again throughout the history of the Church, the Holy Spirit has brought in people of wide and varied backgrounds into the Church.  My point is that we at Center have to broaden our view of who can be part of Center’s fellowship. Anyone who wants to repent and commit their life to Jesus has to be welcomed here!  Even if we try to keep Center just for the types of people some feel will fit in and reject the others that will not, then God will not let that happen. Either Center will dry up and die or we welcome everyone, and Center will grow and flourish for years to come!  I am on the side of changing our culture so that the hundreds of folks all around Center who do not go to church can find a home here at Center Church!  How about you? Can you work to make family church be broader and more inclusive and become a true church family? I feel Center stands at this crossroad as it enters its 3rd centennial.  Amen |