

Trinity United Methodist Church
June 10, 2018
'Resisting False Teachers' Rev. Geri Hamlen

Let the Children Come Setting the Stage with the children: *Donkeys*

What do you know about donkeys?

Carrying loads. Kind of dumb? Noise?

In the Bible: Noah's ark.

Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

Jesus rode on a donkey.

And there's another donkey story that isn't told as often.

It's the story of Balaam, who fell in love with the money he could make by doing wrong.

In the old days there were lots of different religions and different gods and Balaam sold his services to whichever religion would pay him the most. Whether he agreed with the religion or not. Whether he believed in the gods or God or not.

And the God that we love said...I want to teach that Balaam a lesson—that I am the Lord God and he should stop getting his money from those other religions.

But Balaam wouldn't listen to God so...God sent a donkey to talk to him instead!

How strange would that be...to hear a donkey talk...

New Testament Reading 2 Peter 2: 15 – 16

They have gone off the road and become lost like Balaam, the son of Beor,
who fell in love with the money he could make by doing wrong;

but Balaam was stopped from his mad course

when his donkey spoke to him with a human voice,
scolding and rebuking him.

The word of God from long ago to the people of God today.

Thanks be to God.

Let's all try to do what God wants so we don't have to wonder if God is going to send a donkey to tell us what we're doing wrong!

Children can leave for Junior Worship while Mark and Dawn prepare to sing.

Second Scripture reading

This summer, we're reading through the 7 letters to the churches in John's Revelation from Jesus. There is much in the Revelation that seems pretty fantastic and kind of out there in an alternate universe perhaps but I can assure you that the 7 churches actually existed in 7 cities that were as real as our Iron Mt/Kingsford location. Here are some pictures to help you imagine what it might have been like back in Bible Times.

PPT 1 Map of the area

PPT 2 Like Ephesus, Pergamum was another wealthy city with mines and textiles and agriculture. A lot of ruins remain...the Sacred Way. A Roman road that led up into the hills where the temples to Roman gods and Caesar were built.

PPT 3 You can see the lay of the land and the modern city of Bergama, Turkey in the upper right corner. Pergamum had a lower city and an upper city...built on levels up into the hills.

PPT 4 In addition to Temples they had an amphitheater and an active arts community.

PPT 5 You can maybe get a better feel looking at the theater from the floor. In this wealthy and prosperous city of Pergamum, there was a small community of people who believed that Jesus was their Lord and Savior. They were chosen to receive a letter from Jesus through John. Let's hear what their letter says:

Second Reading Revelation 2: 12 – 17

Pastor: Jesus said to John...

'And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

Liturgist: 'I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is.

Yet you are holding fast to my name,

and you did not deny your faith in me

even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one,

who was killed among you, where Satan lives.

Pastor: *So Pergamum was a pretty ungodly place...a place where Satan not only lives but has his throne. And Jesus compliments the people who call themselves followers of Jesus. He compliments them for holding fast to their faith. Yes...that's what we all try to do, right? But it's hard sometimes...so Jesus has more to say. Just like he's done with the other letters, Jesus starts off with the compliments and then, then comes the challenges:*

Liturgist: But I have a few things against you:

you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam,

who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel,

so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication.

So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Pastor: *So the letter describes the problems that Jesus sees within that particular community of faith...They've gotten off the road. Maybe, like Balaam, loving the money that comes with wrong doing. Maybe forgetting the true purpose of following Jesus. Maybe taking up practices of the culture that are contrary to the way God teaches us to live. But with Jesus, when there's a problem, there's also...a solution. What's the solution, Drew?*

Liturgist: Repent then!

Pastor: *Repent. Turn around...away from wrong-doing and turn back towards Jesus. So far...3 out of the 7 letters in Revelation have spoken of repentance.*

Ephesus: Repent of your lack of love and turn to the love and acts that you first did. Keep first things first.

Thyatira: Jezebel...a false teacher, encouraging people to eat unhealthy food and engage in sexual immorality. Well, Jesus gave her time to repent but she would not.

And now in Pergamum...Jesus says again...Repent then! And if not...there will be problems. Let's hear what Jesus says about the consequences for the city of Pergamum.

Liturgist: If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.
Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Pastor: *Jesus is going to make war against the false teachers. Would any of us want to be on the receiving end of the sword in Jesus' mouth? Whether it's a literal sword with bloodshed or, I have visions of the false teachers being sent to the principal's office and Jesus there giving them a tongue lashing they would never forget. It is best to be avoid those false teachings, that's for sure.*

But the letter doesn't end there. In addition to compliments and the problems, solutions, repentance and consequences, each of the 7 letters also include a promise from God: Hear of the great and wonderful gifts that Jesus promises to the people of Pergamum.

Liturgist: To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.
The word of God from long ago to the people of God today.
Thanks be to God.

Sermon 'Pergamum: *Resistance to False Teaching*' Pastor Geri
The people of Pergamum, some of them anyway, had gone off the road and gotten lost...at the hands of false teachers. They found a Balaam for their time and place. A Balaam who encouraged unclean eating habits and fornication...unhealthy sexual practices. Kind of like that Jezebel in Thyatira last week. Those people of Pergamum accepted those false teachings and found themselves, as Peter said, 'off the road and lost.'

And Jesus wasn't happy about that.

Instead of sending them a donkey to rebuke and scold them...like God did with Balaam, Jesus himself dictated a letter to Pergamum, warning them of consequences and trying to guide them back to the right road. Repent then! He says. Turn away from the false teachings and *hold fast to my name, he says.*

Jesus is saying: Do not deny your faith in me even unto death if need be...like Antipas, one of the first century martyrs...a faithful one who was killed among the Pergamums, where Satan lives.

Yes, following Jesus is a life and death situation in that time and that place just as it is wherever Satan wanders loose and free...which would be everywhere and all the time. We know that being faithful and seeking the truth of Jesus Christ is always a matter of life and death for everyone everywhere because sin lurks at our doors. Temptations are ever-present in all the ages in this land of the living. And False teachers show up everywhere...the Bible tells us and warns us and guides us.

The challenge is...how do you tell if someone is a false teacher or a true teacher? How do we know if we are being led astray, off the road or not? And how do we resist the false teachings?

What can keep us from getting lost and needing a donkey to come and save us?

Well, in this brief time that we have together this a.m. I'm going to give you three simple and straightforward tools to use as you listen to people who seem to have an agenda for leading you somewhere and you don't know if it's on the road or off. Sometimes, it's hard to tell if someone is a false teacher or not.

These Simple tools and rules come from John Wesley himself. They are the 3 General Rules in our Book of Discipline.

1. The first one is: Do no harm. Don't hurt others...other people. The environment. God's church. Don't do damage...call names...retaliate in anger. Don't withhold your time and your treasure and your love...because abandonment and rejection and disconnection are hurtful. And damaging. Harmful. Do no harm. And if someone is suggesting that you take a course of action that will result in abandoning God and God's people, that rejects some part of God's creation...all of which was labelled good by God...even mosquitoes. Then you may well be off the road and lost. Resist the temptation. Do no harm. And if you're not sure if what's being suggested is harmful or not but you wonder or suspect that it might be...then it's probably best to stop and think about it. And let people with some wisdom and faithfulness to God help you. Do no harm.
2. Number 2 way to resist false teachers. Do good. Be merciful. Be patient. Be truthful. Speak and act from a place of love...out of care and concern for the well-being of others. One of the preachers at Conference said over and over again: 'Love is being deeply committed to the well-being of others.' We do good when we act out of a sincere desire to do whatever it takes so that the people around us, yes, our neighbors in all their many forms, are fed and clothed and safe and warm and educated and valued as the precious children of God they are.

And if someone is suggesting a course of action that is going to leave a group of people in danger, in poverty, in prison, separated from their children...

And if you are tempted to follow that person...you just might be going off the road and getting lost. Resist the call to go in the wrong direction. Remember: Do good. Be merciful. Commit yourself to the well-being of others. If you do that, you, yes you, may well have something to teach to the false teachers.

3. Number 3 way to resist false teachers: Stay in love with God. I was in a SS class with young children a long time ago and the question came up...what is love? I'll never forget the little girl who said...God invented love. Love for us. Love for the world. Love so amazing that there's plenty to go around. The Bishop in his preaching at Conference reminded us that:

We are the recipients of great love from God, through Jesus Christ, in the heart of the Holy Spirit. God's steadfast love endures forever and ever. Why would we distance ourselves from that incredible source of peace and power and delight?

We go down that wrong road and forget about God because there are false teachers telling us that there are other activities more important than prayer, than church, than Bible reading.

That there are other goals more worthy of our time and attention.

False teachers tell us to fill our lives with stuff that does nothing to draw us closer to God and God's love.

Jesus calls us to resist the false hopes and fake success that is held out to us.

Remember that God's way is the way of truth, and love and beauty.

God will never get tired of pouring love into our tired, world weary souls.

God will continue through all eternity to give us grace and love.

Enough love that we will gain the desire and the strength to share God's love with others.

Because, as Bishop Bard said: We are the recipients of God's great love and we are the bearers and distributors of the same. And the more we give it away, the more we get.

Can't keep what we have unless we give it away.

Yes, false teachers are all around us now, just as they were in Pergamum. We too can

Repent and resist. Do not deny your faith in Jesus.

Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in love with God who will always love you.

And then go and share that love with the world.

At Conference there was an act of grace during one of the worship services:

Handwashing for whoever wanted it and the gift of this Towel...You can't see what it says but these words from John Wesley are probably familiar:

**“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”**

If we can do all of that, then we will leave the false teachers to the donkeys. God will show them the way or, as Jesus said in his letter to Pergamun: *I will come to you soon and make war against them—those false teachers with the sword of my mouth. Let anyone who has an ear...listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

Amen.