

A Church Irrevocably Bound by Love and Grace, Part 2
based on Mark 7:1-23, David Jahnke, 6/7/15

I want to say from the beginning how blessed I have been to be able to work with Tom over these last four years. There is no need for words about his excellent ministry because we see and hear the fruits of his labor every Sunday.

Tom and I have prayed together regularly— for our work together, for each other, our families, for this church. We have prayed over and over that the divisive and destructive work of the enemy would be bound and would not have its way. And that remains our prayer today.

A church member said the following when I let her know the news, “Now is the time for the church to pull together, not come apart.” Amen and I trust that will happen.

We will be saying good-bye to Deborah as well, who is one if not the best organist I have ever heard in my life. We will miss you both dearly. There is much more to say and we will do so and commission the two of them on June 28th which will be their last Sunday here.

And while we will say good-bye on the 28th, our fellowship in the Spirit of God, of course, will not be broken. And the same goes for other PCUSA churches who are leaving the denomination. Because while we disagree about matters of doctrine (as Christians have since the beginning of the church) we remain brothers and sisters in Christ. And as one of these new members alluded to the other night, these brothers and sisters need to serve where their conscience faces no stumbling blocks and where they can thus do the most and their best work for God.

And while I am on new members, let's please not forget them. They and their gifts have come to us and are a tremendous blessing to us! This whirlwind of a week reminded me of the song we sing with Derek driving the beat on the drums as we cry out to God, “You give and take away. You give and take away. But my heart will choose to say, Lord blessed be your name!”

Wondrous and glorious and terrible and sad things are happening around us all the time. And we press forward blessing the name of the Lord and blessing His people.

I mean my heart is grieved but it is nothing like what so many are feeling this week. I did two memorial services Friday in which mothers had to say good-bye to their children. One of the deceased was 52 with a wife and two children and one was 46. Between services, someone called me on the phone trying to get a ride back here from Utah where he and his son were for *the 19-year old's* mother's funeral. Their old van broke down and they did not have enough money to get it fixed or get bus tickets for them both. He called a little later while I was doing the second service and they were able to find a charity that bought them tickets. All of this tragic deep loss kind of relativized everything that we are going through this week.

Back now to the passage and its implications. Jesus was accused of breaking the law of the elders. And he also sometimes broke the Sabbath commandments. Jesus fired right back at them that they may know the Law but they are far from God's heart. And, in fact, they themselves made up traditions that allowed them to get around God's commandments.

Amazing that this passage came up this week, right? We can build a little on one thing that Libby poignantly presented last week. She gave one side of a difficult and divisive issue in the church— conservatives argue that liberals in the church abandon the clear commandment of God in favor of their own precepts; that the Old and New Testaments are both clear about homosexual practice being a sin, and yet they deny this in favor of the culture around them.

The other side fires back that conservatives may be close to God with their lips but their hearts far from him; that they miss the forest of God's Love and mercy and desire for all people to be in loving, affectionate, committed self-giving relationships; they miss this forest for the trees of culturally conditioned and non-universal laws from the Old Testament, many of which are no longer binding.

So who is right? Who knows? Maybe both. Chew on that for a while. I mean we are all so far from what God expects and what God intends for humanity. If you have any doubt of that, take a serious look at Jesus and in particular, at his sermon on the mount. We can hardly even fathom living as Jesus lived. And when we hear much of what he teaches and calls us to, it is hard to believe he is serious.

And yet...and yet!! God continues to shower us with grace upon grace; and walk with us, baby step after baby step; always accepting us; slowly reforming us; working His way in and through our broken-ness and finitude; in and through imperfect and yet faithful, loving relationships...to let us know better and feel a little more His perfect Love and share it with others.

When Jesus came to the outskirts of Jerusalem, he looked at the great wonderful city of God and he wept and he said this:

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-- but now it is hidden from your eyes. **43** The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. **44** They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Jesus was not expecting perfection from his people; but he was expecting peace. He was God's prophet with a Word to His people. And that word was not about just *accepting* or tolerating people with different theologies and politics; not just accepting sinners and enemies. God's Word was that we have to love them all. We have to sit down at a table with them, as he did and break bread and share stories and get to know each other and allow the Spirit of God to work wonders.

Jesus wept because the leaders and so many other righteous, good and zealous brothers of his just could not accept this Word. They kept calling for the judgment and ostracism of sinners and rebellion against the enemy Rome. So in 70 a.d. Jesus' prophesy about Jerusalem came true. Rome said, "Enough is enough with you rebellious people and your skirmishes every few years." They besieged and levelled Jerusalem, killing thousands upon thousands.

So do we accept that God has come to us in Jesus; do we accept God's Word to love and show peace to all. I believe we all do. As a long-standing member of this church said the other night and I am paraphrasing, "What has always amazed me about this church is how people from very different places politically and theologically—from the far left to the far right-- we have been able to come together and joyfully worship and share in the work of God."

May that wonderful history be our future as we bear the Spirit of Love and Peace to a deeply divided world...all through the one who can do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine; to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

