

A White Envelope

12/13/2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

I want to start today by telling you all a little story. It's the story of a man named Mike and his wife Nancy. Mike hated Christmas. Mind you, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the materialistic spending and the frantic search for a present for someone that more or less says, "I didn't know what to get you." One year, knowing this, Nancy gave Mike a gift that actually meant something to him, and it resulted from their son Kevin's wrestling match. The team Kevin went up against were wrestling without headgear and whose clothes looked nothing short of tattered. Seeing how it pained Mike to see people in such need, much less children, Nancy went to the local sporting goods store, bought that opposing team headgear, shoes, etc., and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church who sponsored them. On Christmas Eve, she placed a small, white envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what she had done, and that this was his gift from her. Suffice it to say, Mike really enjoyed that gift, so much so that she did it year after year, each year spending money on those who were in need of it, each year Mike and the children sitting in anxious anticipation of what was in the envelope that year. In reading this story, it got me thinking that, often, when we talk about "love," we speak about it as something that we need and how we see it expressed to us. However, as children of God and as "Servants of the Lord," a title raised in the passage for today, "love" is not just what we need to receive but is what we need to give. "Love," this year more than ever, is what we need to help others feel, not what we should be aiming to feel ourselves, and we do so by being Servants of the Lord, as the reading for today calls us to do.

The writer of the reading for today is a disciple of a disciple of Isaiah writing to God's people shortly after they have been brought back from exile. He is speaking to them about what it means to be a Servant of the Lord, a title we almost instantly attribute to Jesus, and for good reason. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus picks up a scroll in the synagogue, reads the first couple verses of this passage, puts it down, and tells the people, "Today, you have seen this passage fulfilled in me." However, as much as we as readers would like to end this interpretation here, thinking the reading from Isaiah 61 is a prediction of Jesus' coming and talking about what Jesus will do during his ministry, it's not. In fact, it's not a prediction at all, but rather a clarification of an earlier passage, written many years prior.

Earlier on in Isaiah, a direct disciple of Isaiah speaks to the Israelites while they are in exile about being a Servant of God, but in this earlier writing, what it means to be a "Servant of God" is rather ambiguous. The definition of what a "Servant of God" is and does is not as clear-cut as in Isaiah 61. In fact, there isn't even a definition of this Servant as being an individual or the community acting as one body. This ambiguity of if the Servant is an individual or the collective is debatably intentional, almost as if to invite those who read and hear this calling to serve not just as individuals but to come together and serve as a collective too. This isn't necessarily someone claiming they are the Servant but rather is an invitation to all to claim that title for themselves. Here is a calling from God to God's people to love one another, both in their individual efforts and their collective efforts. However, this calling to love and to serve is more than just "love your neighbor."

As we go through the list of those mentioned by this disciple of a disciple of Isaiah, we find a common thread: these people are not just neighbors. Rather, they are the marginalized among our neighbors. The oppressed, the heartbroken and those who mourn, captives and prisoners; these are the lowest of the low. These are the people who are on the outskirts of society, potentially even rejected by society. These are the people who have had the roughest go of all and are the most in need of redemption, love, and God's presence. Servants are by definition below those whom they serve, and to serve the lowest of the low, to serve "the least of these" and to show them the love we ourselves are shown is to put one's self lower than low, to humble one's self in the purest sense of the word. As theologian Glen Bell puts it, "This text invites us all to see our neighbors anew, to recognize their day-to-day lives as open opportunities for liberty, release, comfort, and healing." In other words, no one is without a need for care, comfort, and compassion, and there isn't a day that goes by that we are not presented with an opportunity to live into this title of "Servant of the Lord."

We have a prime example of a "Servant of the Lord" in the story I told in the beginning with Nancy. However, that's not the end of the story of Nancy and Mike. Unfortunately, Mike got cancer and lost his battle, but it didn't stop the tradition. Amidst all the grief Nancy felt that first Christmas without Mike, she carried on and got an envelope in the tree with a note saying who she had helped, like she had done in years prior. What she didn't know was that her children, more excited about "what's in the envelope" than "what did I get" from the start of the tradition, unbeknownst to her and even to each other, also did it. Christmas morning rolled around, and the envelope Nancy had put in the tree was accompanied by three others. All three of her children, for the first time, had spent money not on physical objects for each other, but on helping those who are in need the most. What greater examples of being "Servants of the Lord" have we than this, and to that, I ask you all: Who's in your envelope this year?