

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC

May 13, 2018

Danvers, MA

Rev. Kevin M Smith

John 17:6-19

A World of Chains

I was profoundly moved by the “Mission Sunday” we experienced together a few weeks ago. Maple Street Church is blessed with a mission spirit and the World Service ministry exemplifies that spirit. Grace Phinney, and all those who serve on the World Service ministry, I deeply thank you. You have a loving, caring, and generous spirit that reflects the kingdom of God, the reign of God in a broken world.

During Ray Tilton’s talk that Sunday he painted a troubling picture of the life of a refugee family. Can you imagine having bombs landing all around your neighborhood in Danvers; your kids not able to attend school, food in short supply or non-existent, no health clinics a short drive away, and your own government attacking you or expelling you from your home.

Our brave soldiers and sailors often come home from battle zones with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) which used to be called “shell shock.” It’s way more than that. Its effects are devastating in every way—emotionally, psychologically, financially, and it’s a destroyer of the family. Suicide is way too prevalent among our brave military service people and military people from countries all over the world. It can be the same for civilians, such as those from Syria, the former Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other peoples around the world who have had to flee for their very lives. Military people and refugees have lived in two worlds—one of peace, love, community, and another of strife, violence, starvation, homelessness, and emotional and psychological hell. And many refugees who are young children have never experienced that former world—they have only in their entire lives lived in that horrible world.

In my life I have come to believe there are two worlds that are presented to us—the world of all the harsh volatility of human brokenness and the world where God’s love, compassion, and forgiveness reigns. These two worlds exist and proceed through time together on parallel planes. One does not have to experience tragic warfare or be a refugee from one’s homeland to experience both of these worlds.

Listen to the words of Jesus—

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

While Jesus certainly experienced the former world of brokenness and pain that I have talked about, he was telling his disciples that world doesn’t own him or them. I believe that God, through Jesus, chose to enter that broken harsh world in order to save it, in

order to show that another world existed—a world which people can do their very best to live and to belong to.

We humans suffer from one of the greatest gifts God has given us. That gift is free will shared with imperfect human beings. Human beings who all have been captured from time to time, moment to moment, letting themselves be owned by the world of pain and heartbreak. Often it is a world they do not choose—like our refugees, like babies born with congenital medical issues, like children born into oppression that are cultural, social, and/or economic. Like people who are betrayed or cheated. But just as often, through the dicey gift of free will, it is our choices in life or in the moment that bring upon a world of heavy burdens, brokenness, or strife. We speak or act unkindly, we are motivated by fear, greed, jealousy, or revenge. Sometimes we just act obliviously to other people's pain.

We can choose not to be owned by that world. We do have the choice to belong to the world that Jesus preached about and lived—the world of loving unconditionally even when other people wrong you; the world of sharing and being generous to others even when you have little resources yourself; the world of confronting and opposing a culture that discriminates against others because of who they are in their individuality.

Choosing which world is a life-long, on-going, choice—often moment by moment.

Because we face this daunting gift of free will, we all fall short of the intention of God's love and God's kingdom.

But you can equip yourself with a foundation that will help you spend more time in God's reign of love, compassion, doing justice, and being forgiving. One way to do that is to be in community with other people who are striving to be good neighbors. The church is one of those communities. It is a good choice because, hopefully, the premises and assumptions underlying the church or synagogue or mosque community are based in the love of God. It is not always the case as we all know; but if we in this community can buy into and live out God's vision of the beloved community, it's a very good start.

I applaud all the young families who struggle through the week in so many ways who can find the time to bring their children to church. They know that laying a solid, loving, foundation will equip their beloved children for a world that is not always fair. I applaud all the older people and long-time members who have chosen to stay with the church even through the hard times, the squabbles, the financial shortcomings, the succession of ministers, and who have put themselves in service to God by cooking and cleaning, by teaching and mentoring, by reading and singing and praying, and by knuckling down and working through complex hard issues in love, patience, and persistence.

A church, this church, can be a welcome way station of God's kingdom and reign in a hard world. Thank you to our new members this morning who have put their faith in this little corner of God's world.

Brothers and sisters, we all at times become refugees from God's world. But, know, that it is never forever. We can do a lot by making the hard, loving, good, informed,

reasoned, and inspired choices to live more into the kingdom of God than the world that falls so short. Keep building a good foundation that will help you live in the reign of God more continuously throughout your day. Let go of the chains of your own making that keep you down or hold you back. When you are manacled with chains not of your own making, seek the help of someone, reach out, don't struggle on you own. May we all love God and break free of those chains foisted upon us and the chains we entangle ourselves with. God bless each and every one you. Love and serve the Lord "so that you many have joy complete in yourselves." Peace. Shalom. Salaam. Amen.