

A summary of the sermon, 05-06-2018

The Miracle of the Growing Thing: From a Slaveholding Congregation to a Shareholding Congregation

Hope Central Church

Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett

John 15:1-17 - The Vine and the Branches (please see scripture below)

How can white people claim Christianity and treat black people the way they do? This is James Cone's central question. He wrote that to be integrated into such a church offers black people no dignity, no place for living or thriving—the white church is committed to integration only if black people adopt whiteness. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote in his book, *Reconstructing the Gospel*, this is a slaveholding church. Benjamin Perkins wrote the kind of church we want to be is a shareholding congregation. Cone, Wilson-Hartgrove remind us that in Jesus's first sermon, quoting Isaiah 41, he said he had come to bind up the broken heart, to bring release to the captive. Cone and also the Rev. Dr. William Barber have written that if the church does not do this, what the church does is heresy. In my sermon, yesterday, I got to say this.

I've been suffering to answer the question, what we are at Hope Central? We have been wondering if we are a white church—well—not exactly—because to say so excludes our people of color. Are we a black church? We are not that either—our beginnings are in the white church and it has not historically served a black congregation, and does not carry the culture of black church. Are we a queer church? No, we're not only that. Are we a straight church? We're not only that. Are we a cis church, a trans church? A rich church, a working class church, an urban church? No, we're all those things, none of those things.

I am claiming for Hope Central Church, that we are no long willing to measure ourselves against congregations bigger or richer, congregations who measure success by its adherence to whiteness. We will no longer try strategies to grow and survive in those ways. We will no longer be the pet church of congregations unwilling to be havens for queer folks, trans folks, black and brown folks, poor folks. We will no longer be a slaveholder church. Also, it is no longer possible to say we are only a place of respite for ourselves, our wounded and forsaken selves. What we will do is claim all of who we are, claim all our identities, understanding ourselves to be blessed to be made in God's image. What we will do is measure our success by Jesus' call to love God with our whole hearts, minds and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We will claim the anointing to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor. We will do this inside our congregation and neighborhood, and do it for the world. We will be a shareholder church.

We will no longer be a slaveholder church—we will be a shareholder church.

John 15: 1-17 (tr. The Message)
The Vine and the Branches

“I am the Real Vine and God, my loving parent, is the Farmer. God cuts off every branch of me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.

“Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how God shows who God is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

“I’ve loved you the way God has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my God’s commands and made myself at home in God’s love.

“I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from God.

“You didn’t choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won’t spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask God in relation to me, God gives you.

“But remember the root command: Love one another.”