

July 4, 2021
 Farmville Baptist Church
 When Enough is Enough
 Isaiah 61:1-3; Mark 4:30-32
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Today we conclude our series on Enough. We began a month ago by answering the questions Is God Enough and Are We Enough with a resounding YES. Last week we struggled with the question How much is Enough? If there is a question to pose today, it would be, "What should our response be when we get to the point that enough is enough?" Almost 250 years ago today, the American colonists decided that they had had enough of England's taxation without representation. They chose to respond by declaring their independence from King George's oppressive government. Back in those days, not everyone agreed on the best course of action for our new country (PAUSE) some things haven't changed have they? Today we continue to see our culture becoming increasingly polarized. Individuals and groups are speaking out and acting out in ways that seem to contribute to the problem more than they contribute to the solution. How and when do we say Enough is Enough?

Many individual Christians have said enough is enough by joining in support of a variety of groups over the last few years - from the #MeToo movement to Black Lives Matter, to those who supported the LGBTQ community during pride month, to families who dream of immigrating here to have a chance at a better life, there are many groups that are still feeling the sting of injustice. Unfortunately, I can't think of any of these protest movements that have originated in the church. Instead of leading the way on social issues, we tend to be a couple of decades behind. That was true in Caucasian churches with civil rights, it has been true with women's issues, it is true with several of the issues we're facing in society today. That's a shame, for it means that as a church we have lost our prophetic voice and therefore much of our relevance. In many ways, I think it means we have lost our original calling as God's people.

Unfortunately, that's not a new problem. Way back in Genesis, God called Abraham and his descendants to be God's chosen people and why? So that they might be a blessing to all nations and draw all

people to God. But as with us today, it was a rocky journey for Israel, with fits and starts and setbacks along the way. When we come to the passage in Isaiah that we heard earlier, God's people are living in the aftermath of the exile; they are standing on the threshold of moving back into the land. In these chapters, Zion is pictured as a bride awaiting restoration; but in earlier chapters, she has been described as a desolate mother, and a widow whose husband is God. It has been a long and difficult 70 years when the people hear these words from the prophet:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
 because the LORD has anointed me;
 he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
 to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and release to the prisoners;
 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;

In this passage, the prophet is recalling older traditions in their faith journey, but he is molding them in new ways for a new time. In this context, liberty means more than literal freedom for the exiles, it involves reconfiguring the whole socio-economic structure of the community in a way that reflects the 50 year jubilee ó a time when slaves are freed and land is returned to its original owners. In this context, salvation points to a **quality** of life that reflects God's desires for the community. Salvation in this context doesn't refer to an eternal destination. Rather, it means good news, healing, liberty, release and comfort for the people here and now.

It is crucial to note however, that these things ó healing, liberty, release and comfort, are not an end in themselves for the returning exiles. As a restored jubilee community, Israel is once again to be a source of God's blessing to the nations around it so that they too will be drawn to the ways of God. No matter where we live or work in the worlds, all of God's people should be working for this level of liberty and justice for all people.

It is beautiful when we see that happen isn't it? Over the last year, Farmville joined together through Farmville Cares and a number of other agencies to provide hope, healing and comfort to those in our

community hit hardest by the corona virus. During the ice storms in February, churches joined with local agencies to offer water, power, food and warm places to stay. We saw the suffering of those around us and we said Enough is Enough.

As wonderful as this is, there are some questions that we all have to answer, as individuals and as a congregation is, Is this type of effort enough? Are we doing enough by meeting immediate needs, or is God calling us to address some of the larger societal systems that make it hard for everyone to live as freely as God intends? "What ways might God be calling us to usher in this restored jubilee community for all those around us? Another way to ask the question might be, "Are there ways the church can be proactive before we get to the point where enough is enough?" One scholar reminds us that mission is not something that we do - it is not something that goes out from God's people by sending money or missionaries. Rather, mission is who we are - mission defines God's people - the church - as existing not for ourselves, but existing for the sake of the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the prisoners.¹

I have always know that Scripture supports these principles of social or societal justice, but this week I learned that in the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the words poor or justice are mentioned in one of every ten verses overall. In the gospel of Luke, it is one in every seven verses.

Jesus clearly lived into these principles. Early in his own ministry, when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth, he chose to read the same passage we heard earlier from Isaiah in the synagogue, adding, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." At first the crowd spoke well of him, but then the sentiment began to shift. I wonder if they only wanted the easy parts of following Jesus. Did they get a glimpse that day of what following Jesus would really mean? Did they begin to understand that when we welcome strangers, what is strange about them comes along too? Did they start to realize that when we reorder our communities according to God's justice, that what has been familiar to us no longer is? We can't know for sure of course, but by the time Jesus was finished speaking, the crowd was so angry that they drove him out of town and up to the top of

the hill so that they might hurl him over the cliff. It certainly wasn't a message that the church growth specialists would have deemed a success, and not one that encourages any of us to sign up for following Jesus.

Despite this early threat on his life, Jesus remained true to these principles, even though he knew how things would ultimately end. It wasn't easy for him, just like it's not easy for us. Sometimes it feels like we're rolling the boulder uphill doesn't it? The moment we stop for even a brief breather, it comes rolling back down on us. The minute we make progress on one issue, another one pops up. The minute one single parent finds a job and permanent housing, another loses their job and their shelter. We no sooner help resettle refugees from one area of the world, when a war breaks out somewhere else, displacing thousands more families. If we're honest, it can get discouraging sometimes can't it?

I hope that on days when we are discouraged, the parable of the mustard seed will bring us hope. Jesus begins by asking, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God?" It is like a mustard seed, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of seeds on earth; yet when it is grown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

As with all parables, this one has multiple meanings. But first let's set the stage. A mustard seed is very tiny, but it is not the smallest of all seeds (botanists say that distinction belongs to the black orchid) ó Scholars say that for Jesus' hearers, it was the smallest seed that you plant in the ground, or the smallest seed that was familiar to them. What Jesus' hearers would have known is that from a seed this small, a very large plant grows very rapidly.

The good news here, the most encouraging interpretation of this parable, is that even a small act can reap an abundant harvest. Our lives are intricately connected. One small act can ripple farther than we ever imagined. That's how movements get started. Christianity spread as the result of the work of the eleven original disciples, a rag-tag band if there ever was one. Out of these humble beginnings, the Jesus movement spread world wide. I want us to be encouraged because nothing we ever do is wasted, nothing we ever do is for naught.

But in addition to the encouraging words in this parable, there are some words of challenge. We need to be careful not to think that the mustard seed grows into a great plant solely because of our hard work. The nature of the kingdom God is mysterious, God's grace is at work in us and through us, and often, despite us. As a church, we are privileged to be people of mission joining God's work in the world. But, a tiny seed becomes a great bush only when it is sown into the earth. Although it is hard to keep pushing that rock up the hill, the difficult and challenging places where we find ourselves out in the world can become holy ground when we are planted and sown there.ⁱⁱ

Here is the other challenge from this parable. Why would Jesus use a mustard plant, a large shrub really, to describe the kingdom of God? It would have been a shocking analogy to Jesus hearers. Why not use the analogy of an acorn that grows into a mighty oak tree? Why not draw on the image of the towering cedar tree, a common illustration for a mighty kingdom in the Old Testament? Do you remember how the parable started? "To what can the kingdom be compared?" As we see over and over in Jesus's ministry the kingdom is not what we expect. It did not begin with a political take-over or a big show, but it began with a tiny seed. The seed will grow quickly, and exponentially, but what grows may not be what we expect.

There is plenty to do when we get to the point where enough is enough. But perhaps our greatest challenge as the universal church is to be more proactive, to reclaim our prophetic voice. We need to remember that almost from the very beginning we are called to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

Some say that this vision is unattainable, that this mustard seed of a jubilee community will never grow in to a plant large enough to shelter others. But I don't believe that, not for a minute. I believe that if we keep allowing ourselves to be planted in unexpected, and yes difficult places, with God's help, the kingdom will continue to grow and flourish.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is fond of the phrase: “Building Beloved Community.” We talked about this several times in our recent Wednesday night series. Most of us learned the phrase from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who often spoke of “Beloved Community” as his ultimate hope and purpose.

Dr. King said: **...the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends.... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of humanity.**

Notice, too, what King is *not* saying. He is not saying what we are all too accustomed to hearing in our highly competitive culture—that the end goal is a crushing victory over our opponents. For King, building Beloved Community required the even harder work of reconciliation, redemption, and right relationship, of “transforming opponents into friends.”

Dr. King had a global vision for Beloved Community, one in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth: **In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it.**

In Beloved Community, all forms of discrimination, oppression, and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace and justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

King’s vision mirrors what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Following the way of Jesus is about practicing radical kindness and compassion in our day just as Jesus did in his day—a love that transcends cultural and tribal divisions. But it takes hard work. G.K Chesterton noted: Dr. King’s vision of Beloved Community **“has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”**ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, I pray that we will not be found wanting this morning. Instead I pray that we will have the courage to say Enough is Enough, even when it is difficult. I pray that as a church we will be proactive before Enough is enough.

To that end, will you join me in a time of reflection. Take a moment to identify an issue or a situation in our culture where you have had enough. Where and how would you like to see the Spirit work to bring jubilee community? And what might you, as an individual, be willing to do to help that happen? As we move toward a new vision for FBC, how might God be calling us to model and share Beloved Community?

(Read the verses of God of Grace and God of Glory as closing prayer)

ⁱ Scott Bader-Saye, "Theological Perspective Isaiah 61," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 1, p. 52, 54.

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey Tribble, "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, p 136, 138

ⁱⁱⁱ Terry Maples, "Nurturing Faith in Community," *CBFVA Congregational Resource*, Spring 2021.