

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, November 9, 2008

Texts: **Amos 5:10-15; John 15:12-17**

“That Love and Light, Peace and Hope Can Be For All”

If you have been in worship in recent weeks, you might know that I am moving through a short sermon series which emanates from the benediction that I have used for many years around the baptismal font. The benediction goes like this: “Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So be swift to love; make haste to be kind, that love and light, peace and hope can be for you and for all people everywhere, today and forever.”

The first part of that benediction comes from Henri Frederic Amiel, who was a Swiss philosopher and poet who lived in the mid-1800’s. He is known to us because he wrote one important book – Private Journal. As you might guess, Amiel had a way of saying things sharply and well. Here are a few examples of other memorable lines from him:

The person who insists on seeing with perfect clearness before he decides, never decides.

The test of every religious, political, or educational system is the person that it forms.

Analysis kills spontaneity. The grain once ground into flour springs and germinates no more.

Truth is not only violated by falsehood; it may be equally outraged by silence.

A person without passion is only a latent force, only a possibility, like a stone waiting for the blow from the iron to give forth sparks.

And here is a really good one: *The man who has no refuge in himself, who lives, so to speak, in his front rooms, in the outer whirlwind of things and opinions, is not properly a personality at all. He floats with the current, who does not guide himself according to higher principles, who has no ideal, no convictions--such a man is a mere article of furniture--a thing moved, instead of a living and moving being--an echo, not a voice. The man who has no inner life is the slave of his surroundings, as the barometer is the obedient servant of the air at rest, and the weathercock the humble servant of the air in motion. (see Wikipedia, and Amiel, *Journal Intime*)*

And then with the phrase that we have become familiar with, Amiel actually has another sentence before the “life is short” phrase. The previous sentence says basically that we should not wait to be just, ... “not wait to be demonstrative toward those whom we love until they or we are struck down by illness or threatened with death.” No, “life is short; be swift to love; make haste to be kind.” There needs to be an urgency about life – and we should be sincere and focused in loving and caring. There is no debating that. That has been the focus of my sermons in the past two weeks.

But this sermon today comes from the second part of the benediction, which is not from Amiel. It is something that I have added to Amiel’s wonderful and poetic urgency for the benediction. We are to be swift in our love, hasty in our kindness – so that God’s

love and light, peace and hope, joy and justice, can be for us, and all people everywhere. In fact, the first part of the benediction reminds us of the truth - life is short, and reminds us what we are to do – be swift to love. But the last part of the benediction reminds us how far God sends us, and what God indeed intends for us and for everyone, everywhere. It is good and important to spread love and kindness. But what God really wants is love and light, joy and justice spread around the world – then the reign of God has come in fullness! What God really wants is not just a little more love and kindness in the world, that we would be nice folks who get along. What God really wants is a world where love truly abounds, where peace prevails, where justice takes root, where there is no more suffering or sadness, pain or persecution anywhere. We are to go from this place each week working for that.

So, when worship ends, our work begins again as we seek to fill the world with love and light. That is what it means to be disciples of Jesus. Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of God – the blind see, the crippled walk, the deaf hear, the captives are set free and joy and justice prevail. Our lives are to be promoters of that reign, participants in that coming, because that is what God wants for us and for all people everywhere. Life is short – we need urgency. Our way is absolutely to love, to spread kindness with sincerity and focus. But the final outcome, and what we are all working on, praying for, and longing for is the full reign of God, the fullness of all things in God’s good purposes, where love and light, joy and justice are known by all. It is not only about us doing good. It is about God’s reign emerging in and through us and changing the world. It is not just about spreading love and kindness, and feeling like that is enough. It is about the world looking more and more like God’s world – peace and light, joy and justice for all!

I have been reading a new book by Tony Campolo. Tony came to Blacksburg one year ago as we had the large, ecumenical worship last November in Cassell Coliseum. He was the preacher. Tony likes to call himself an Evangelical. To be an “evangelical” is a bit risky lately. I doubt that many of you would want to say you are an “evangelical.” That word, unfortunately, might associate us with a certain brand of conservative Christians. Well, Tony writes that he was recently on campus at an Ivy League school and he asked students what they thought Evangelicals believed. None of the students defined Evangelicals by any theological convictions. Instead, the general consensus among the students was that “Evangelicals” are those Christians who are anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist, anti-gun-control, pro-war, right-wing, ideologues. Tony Campolo then gave the students a little history lesson in Evangelicals. It was Evangelicals like Charles Finney whose sermons gave energy to the anti-slavery movement in the late 19th century. It was Evangelical preachers who started the momentum to bring about child labor laws and safety in the coal mines. It was Evangelicals who helped win the right to vote for women, and promoted civil rights for blacks, which helped to pave the way for Barak Obama to become the 44th president.

Evangelicals may have a bad name today, but evangelicals have been people who take what Jesus says seriously, so seriously that they modeled their lives on it. Tony keeps saying he is an Evangelical and proud of it. If we say we follow Jesus, we are literally “evangelicals,” but we have to win back the credibility to that name.

Tony Campolo’s newest book is called Red Letter Christians. It is an attempt to listen seriously and sincerely to what Jesus says – the red letters of some Bibles, when the words that Jesus speaks are in red - and basing your life on that. This newest book is about faith and politics and letting Jesus words guide life today. If we say we are

Christian, then we want to follow Jesus with our lives. It is trying to look at all aspects of life through the eyes of Jesus, rather than seeing Jesus through the lens of life. That means reading America with Jesus' eyes, not reading Jesus through America's eyes. It is trying to be serious about following Jesus, not just fitting Jesus into our consumer, capitalist, self-serving lives.

So here is a way to think about this. Jesus says in our passage today, "this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ...I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. Love one another."

If we are called to look at life through the eyes of Jesus, and not just try to fit Jesus into our blessed lives, we have to keep trying to see things as Jesus sees them. Presently, the USA allocates less than four-tenths of 1% (that is .4%), of the federal budget to address world poverty. While so much is done by churches and other groups, the richest nation on earth ought to have a government that does better than that, at least according to Tony (see page 25). Americans make up 4.5 percent of the world's population and consume more than 40% of the world's resources. Given that fact, something is not right when the Americans rank 20th out of 22 of the richest industrialized nations when it comes to assisting the world's poor. We are, remember, called to see America thru the eyes of Jesus. The prophet, Amos, reminds us to "seek good, not evil, that we may live." These are pertinent words.

Edmund Burke has a famous quote that you have all heard. He said "all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." We know in our minds that this is true, but if we are trying to take Jesus' words seriously, we know we have much to do. "Red Letter Christians" accept that challenge as a call to action, as a call to involvement that is not just about spreading love and kindness, but striving to allow love and kindness, joy and justice, peace and hope to be experienced by all people everywhere. We are people who know we are chosen by Jesus, to bear fruit, fruit that will last. We want to keep working on behalf of the poor, the forgotten, the lonely, the left out, and therefore promote God's real reign.

How many Americans have no health care? We should have learned this through the politics of the recent campaign. Is it 40 million? 50 million? But it is not about politics and posturing. It is about faith, if we hear Jesus' words and want to follow them: "this is my commandment that you love one another. Love bears fruit; fruit that will last." That means working and keeping on working on a better world. That is what God wants from us. Not just a little more love and kindness – though that matters – but a world of compassion and care, a world of justice and joy, and there are many struggling people around the world for whom life is much less than God intends.

So, when we listen to Jesus, and take seriously Jesus' message, we are continually sent out – to love - but also to participate in the coming of God's just and peaceable kingdom for all. Be swift to love, make haste to be kind, SO THAT love and light, peace and justice can be for you AND all people everywhere – the fullness of the reign of God!

One of the things that remains so great about this church is how we keep encouraging one another, challenging one another in this commitment to the world. One place where we are involved is Malawi. We talk a lot about our work in Malawi. We have wonderful and providential ties to Malawi. 13 years ago most of us here probably could not find Malawi on the map. Then Chrissie Chawanje came here as a Fulbright Scholar from Malawi at VT and she joined the church. Then her son Jerome came,

thanks to the love and care of this church family. Then soon after she went back to Malawi, we got connected with Sue Makin – a PCUSA medical missionary in Malawi. Then we had William Susewele, and Edith Mmela, and Wotchiwe Kalande come and join the church as they worked on their projects, and they literally took us back to Malawi with them, they helped us get involved, then hosted our young people for longer stays, and then others came and keep coming: Ndalapa Mhango and Absalom Phiri, and others. And you know, we can hardly talk about mission and ministry here without mentioning Malawi.

Here is what we have learned again, as we did with Central America and other projects in other decades, and we have to keep learning it: when people are suffering there, especially with AIDS and hunger, we are less than whole here. When lives are hurting there, we have learned that our lives are hurting here. And our work continues, as hard as it is sometimes, because love and light, peace and hope, joy and justice are for all – and we know we have to keep at it.

It is not just Malawi. The PRAYS team is an example of us helping address local needs. When a family in Blacksburg is living in a despicable trailer, we know that we are called to make it better. This past week, youth and adults from this church have transformed another habitat for a needy family. Why? Because we know we cannot sleep in our comfortable beds very well if neighbors have no place to sleep. It is hard to eat in our fine, luxurious kitchens, if people we know have no kitchens. We help each other remember that we are called not just to spread love and kindness, but to promote God's reign in the world, work for joy and justice wherever we find ourselves. Our lives are to be about participating in the light and love, wholeness and hope of all people. And we keep doing that until God's kingdom comes. And in the work of the Kingdom and the coming of the kingdom, we experience and know the rich blessings of God.

So, wonderful people of BPC, we keep at this work. God blesses us as we seek to be a blessing. God loves us and calls us to loving commitment to the peaceable and hopeful reign of God for all. God is our refuge and strength, and God invites us, expects us to be a lifeline and a strength for others. And as we keep doing that, God's new heaven and new earth emerge in and through us. May God bless us as we carry on. May God use us for goodness and hope in the world. This is what it means to be God's people. Alleluia. Amen.

Prayer: Holy God, the prophet's words point us in your way: seek good, and not evil, and we will live. Love good and establish justice, and then your reign comes among us in fullness. Thanks be to you, O God. Amen.

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, November 9, 2008 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.