

“Walking the Way of Faith: Do Not Withhold Goodness”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: November 17, 2024



In a sermon I gave last month¹ I referenced a dramatic shift that took place about two hundred and fifty years ago within the Christian community.

This paradigm shift took the form of how Christian communities understood the primary question about faith.

About two hundred and fifty years, the burning question about faith shifted from “how do I walk faithfully with God?” to “what does it take to be saved?”

In one fell swoop, this shift pulled our primary focus away from God and onto ourselves. It transformed our primary pursuit from a relationship with God to a transaction for ourselves.

At the deepest level, this shift represents an effort at control.

In my earlier message, I focused on what was lost in our relationship with God when the shift happened.

This morning, I would like to talk about how this shift has affected our human relationships.

You see, asking the question “who is saved?” is essentially asking the question — “who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’?”

With this new framing, humanity shifts from a posture of collective listening for God to an exercise in human line drawing.

We draw lines about who is in and who is out.

We assume the role of judge (as James suggests) rather than as a fellow traveler on the journey of life with God.

When we draw lines, we dehumanize.

We no longer see that we are all bearers of God’s image.

Sadly, the human practice of drawing lines and declaring who is in and who is out has a very long history . . . and extends into today.

Instead of seeing our world as one big wonderful creation and the human species as one global family — human beings have spent a lot of time chopping it up into a lot of little pieces.

¹ Contemplative Service Meditation - October 6, 2024

“Walking the Way of Faith: Do Not Withhold Goodness”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: November 17, 2024



A couple of weeks ago, my husband and I did a virtual tour of the International Space Station. The tour was sponsored by the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, and it began when we put on Virtual Reality Headsets. The tour let us see and listen to the astronauts as they were working aboard the Space Station. In addition, we also got incredible views of the earth from the Station.

All of the astronauts talked about how their time at the Space Station gave them a deeper sense of the unity of earth as our human home.

What we see from the International Space Station is a world with no lines.

Sadly, the church itself has not been immune from line drawing.

And tragically, the church has aligned itself in ways that have caused it to inflict harm on those who were deemed “outside the lines.”

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus is that when He walked the earth, He was not a line drawer.

Not only was Jesus NOT a line drawer, He was a line crosser.

He crossed over to talk to the Pharisees, who did not really like Him.

He crossed over to spend time with sinners, whom no one really liked.

He crossed over to heal and spend time with those who were ostracized.

He touched lepers. He ate with the hated tax collectors.

He aided an ostracized women who were bleeding.

He stood up for the marginalized.

Jesus moved toward people — not away from them.

He humanized them. He did not dehumanize them.

And He always operated out of love and goodness.

He didn’t withhold goodness — even to His enemies.

In fact, He commanded His followers to love their enemies, as Jesus did.

Love, of course, is challenging . . . even with those that we love easily.

Love requires different things at different times.

We have talked about wisdom as the ability to do or say just the right thing at just the right time in just the right way.

So how do we try to walk in love?

A friend of mine shared with me a wonderful practice that the theologian Richard Rohr uses in trying to walk in love. Rohr tries to ask a simple question. In each situation or each person that he encounters, Rohr tries to ask — “what does love require in this circumstance?”

“What does love require?”

“Walking the Way of Faith: Do Not Withhold Goodness”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: November 17, 2024



Rohr would be the first to say that the question is important because what love requires has a way of varying.

Sometimes love requires toughness; sometimes love requires tenderness.

Sometimes love requires yielding; sometimes love requires being unyielding.

Sometimes love means looking closely at ourselves; sometimes love means looking closely at someone else.

Sometimes love requires speaking truth to power; sometimes love requires silence.

Rohr’s question echoes something that Ruth Haley Barton said: “Love is the deepest calling of the Christian life, the standard by which everything about our lives is measured. Any decision-making process that fails to ask the love question misses the point.”²

—

We have talked about wisdom as being the ability to say or do the right thing at the right time in the right way. I think there is a tie between wisdom and love.

When we seek love, we are trying to love by saying or doing the loving thing at the right time in the right way.

Here’s the catch, my friends — human beings do not have this ability. We require help.

As Jesus told us and James confirms, wisdom comes from God.

The only way we can know what love requires — or to do the right thing at the right time is with God’s help. It requires that we walk closely in the Spirit as Jesus did.

It is love that shifts us back to the original faith question — “how to we walk in faith with God?”

Our Scriptures this morning are doing the same thing . . . even if dehumanizing is happening around us, we are called to ask what love requires. Instead of claiming the illusion of control that line drawing can give us, we are called to cultivate dependence on God to show us the way to navigate the spaces where lines are being drawn, where people are being mistreated and where love is being snuffed out.

I will leave you with a story that rabbis teach of a young boy who once asked his Rabbi why human beings were created with two eyes.

The Rabbi responded, “With the left eye you should look at yourself, and see where you can love better. And with the right eye, you should look at others lovingly, always seeking out their best qualities.”³

With God’s help, may we look beyond the lines and learn to see and act in love.

² Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, October 26, 2024.

³ Adapted from <https://www.messianicbible.com/feature/love-and-the-hebrew-language/>