

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany- February 4, 2024

Scripture reading- II Corinthians 4:1-7

YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD

In all my years of pastoral ministry, one of my favorite activities has been to lead groups in which we've looked for and discussed the spiritual and theological meanings that are often present in feature films. It was my pleasure to do that here several times during my year of interim ministry with you.

Of all the movies I've ever chosen for such groups, *Dead Man Walking* is among my top favorites. Starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, it's based on a book of the same title by Sister Helen Prejean. It portrays the remarkable ministry she's had with death row inmates in Louisiana, and one of the best examples of her work is displayed in the film's final scenes.

Matthew Poncelet has been convicted of the brutal murders of two young people. He's been sentenced to die and is walking to the place of his execution. Sister Helen, who has been his spiritual adviser during his last weeks on death row, is with him when he suddenly falls to his knees. She kneels beside him and says, "Look, I want the last thing you see in this world to be a face of love. Will you look at me when they do this thing? You look at me (and) I'll be the face of love for you."

They go to his death chamber and the parents of the young woman and young man that Poncelet and his partner had killed join Sister Helen as witnesses. As the lethal injection is administered, Poncelet looks directly at Prejean as she had urged him to do. Through tears she mouths to him, "I love you," and images of his terrible crimes flash across the screen.

How could this woman be the face of love to a man like that who had done such awful things? How could she be the face of love for someone who had been so hostile towards and dishonest with her when she first had come to know him?

This same question confronts all of us who are followers of Jesus. How can we be the face of love to a world in which so many faces are etched with fear, anger, and hate? How can we be the face of love to people like Matthew Poncelet whose souls have gone so horribly wrong? How can we live amidst the jagged brokenness of this world so that love, hope, and compassion rather than fear, anger, and hate become etched into our faces?

In today's Scripture reading from II Corinthians 4, St. Paul gives us four crucial clues about that. In verse 7, he writes, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." In other words, the face of love, according to Paul, first takes shape in an honest awareness of our own limitations and wrongdoing. It awakens when we recognize that we are not the treasure, but only the clay pots who have received it. In being the face of love for Matthew Poncelet, Sister Helen took this truth to heart. She never acted like she was better than or more worthy than he was.

Matthew soon saw that in her and said, "I thought you'd be doin' nothin' but preachin' to me, but after our first visit I saw I could just talk to you like a friend."

As a real friend, Helen Prejean was willing to recognize and admit to her own limitations and wrongdoing *without becoming defensive*. When she first agreed to Poncelet's request to visit

and talk with him, she completely overlooked and ignored the families of his victims. They sharply challenged her on that, and she confessed to the wrong she had done. Truly sorry for it, she then sought to reach out to them with the same tender and loving care that she showed to Matthew.

In her ongoing ministry, Sister Helen has come to realize that standing righteously for something does not mean that you have to condemn or dehumanize those who differ with you. She strongly opposes the death penalty, but still listens to and has genuine sympathy for the pain and loss that victims' families suffer. Many of them want harsh retribution and she understands that.

She also works to identify with the wrenching dilemmas that prison workers face when their duties require them to perform executions. She prays constantly for God's help and guidance because she knows both how weak and limited she can be, especially in a ministry like hers that is often so demanding. She remembers that she's a clay jar who is of no more value than any other, no matter how warped or cracked those others might be. That's why she's able to cry freely for a murderer like Matthew Poncelet. She loves him simply because of the love that God has poured into her heart.

In II Corinthians 4, verse 1, Paul gives his second clue about being the face of love. He says, "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." Paul knows from his own relationship with the cantankerous Corinthians just how hard it can be to keep reaching out to people who have different ideas, attitudes, or convictions, to people who are of different backgrounds, cultures, religions, or generations. But in Jesus, Paul has also seen how mercifully and persistently God reaches out to him and to all of us no matter how strange, fumbling, and difficult we might become. Paul does not lose heart, but instead keeps reaching out in love- as does Sister Helen.

One of the most striking things about *Dead Man Walking* is how she has kept on doing this in the midst of the intensely stressful circumstances that she describes in her book. She has lived and worked in one of New Orleans' toughest neighborhoods and has added her death row ministry to the other work she's done there. She kept reaching out to a man like Matthew Poncelet who, to put it mildly, was *extremely* obnoxious. He was a white supremacist, a macho braggart, a liar, and a killer.

She kept reaching out to his victims' families, too, once she realized the error of her earlier ways. She visited them in their homes to listen to and pray with them, even though they continued to angrily disagree with her about capital punishment. She went as deeply as she could with them into their fear, anger, and pain. She kept striving to understand them and share herself with them despite her keen awareness of her own limitations.

She also took to heart St. Paul's third clue on being the face of love. In II Corinthians 4, verse 2, he writes, "We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth, we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God." To say the least, this verse packs multiple meanings, but its key is the question of accountability. Paul reminds himself and us that we always stand in God's presence. We're always accountable to God for who we are, for the things that we say, and the deeds that we do.

So, in *Dead Man Walking* Sister Helen insists on holding, not only herself, but Matthew Poncelet accountable as well. In the first days of the week before his execution, she tells him

what Jesus says in John's gospel, chapter 8: "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free" (verse 32). At first, Matthew likes this verse because he thinks that it means he'll get out of prison if only he can get enough people to believe that the lies he keeps telling about his innocence are in fact true. But Jesus and Sister Helen mean something *much* different by this verse, and in time Poncelet comes to see it.

At first, he insists repeatedly that he did not rape or kill anyone, but that it was his partner who went crazy on him, and that booze and drugs got him into the habit of going to a lovers' lane to scare people. He launches into tirades about black people and "the evil government" and the parents of his victims who he claims are trying to kill him.

But Sister Helen tells him no. She tells him to think instead about the girl's father. She says, "He's never going to see his daughter again. He's never going to hold her. He's never going to love her or laugh with her. You blame (your partner); you blame the government; you blame drugs; you blame blacks . . . (but) what about Matthew Poncelet? Where is he in this story? (Is he just an innocent victim?"

And yet, how easy is it to see ourselves in that kind of scene? What is our first impulse? Is it to hold ourselves steadily and truthfully accountable for our misdeeds and difficulties? Or is it to blame someone else for them, whether it be our parents, our spouse, our children, our boss, the government, society, foreigners, or God knows who or what else?

And what is our first instinct with respect to each other? Do we hold one another seriously accountable, or do we let each other slide by? Do we slide by with pat answers to complicated questions? Do we prefer knee-jerk clichés to genuine soul-searching and to honest, mutual, and in-depth effort to solve problems?

Genuine soul-searching and honest, mutual, in-depth effort to solve problems- these are risky business. They require hard work, but they're what any worthwhile relationship is about. They're what the search for love, justice, peace, and reconciliation are about.

With the love that God has poured into her heart, Sister Helen therefore remains strong and clear-eyed about what's at stake with Matthew. She never becomes sentimental or simplistic about him. She sincerely believes that everyone deserves and is capable of real love and from this conviction she sees through to the better possibilities hidden beneath Poncelet's bravado and swagger. She knows that focusing on and encouraging those better possibilities is also central to what it means to hold ourselves and each other truly accountable.

So, on the night that he dies, after Prejean's persistent challenges to him, Matthew Poncelet finally admits to his crimes. Weeping profusely, he at last takes responsibility for them. Sister Helen says to him, "You did a terrible thing, Matt- a *terrible* thing. But you have dignity now. No one can take that from you. You are a son of God, Matthew Poncelet."

Hearing that, he smiles at her and says, "Nobody ever called me no son of God before. They called me a son-of-a-you-know-what a lotta times, but never no son of God." With that, his face takes on a look of wonder. and even of peace.

For the first time he tastes the freedom that Jesus says the truth gives to us. It's the freedom that comes in knowing that our ultimate worth IS rooted purely and simply in being a son or a daughter of God. It means, hallelujah, that we never have to sink into selfishness or dishonesty to try to prove ourselves or to get a leg up on someone else.

The freedom that Jesus gives isn't about getting what we want whenever we want it or about always having endless options to choose from. Instead, it's about having the will and strength

to do what's right despite any fear that we have of what doing right might cost us. It's about the ability and strength to give love, do justice, show mercy, and make peace no matter what circumstances we're in.

Finally, in II Corinthians 4, verse 6, Paul gives his fourth and last clue about being love's face. He says, "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The face of Jesus is all around us when the Holy Spirit gives us eyes to see. It's there in our awareness of being clay jars who have received God's treasure. It's there in every face we see when we reach out to offer this same treasure to others- whether to family, friends, neighbors, strangers, the poor, the sick, prisoners, or those we count as our enemies- in other words, in the faces of everyone. This treasure is God saying to us, "I'll be the face of love for you forever." It's God saying, "I'm there in love for you in every face that you see."

The title of Sister Helen's story, *Dead Man Walking*, comes from the words a prison guard traditionally calls out when a condemned man like Matthew Poncelet begins walking to the place of his execution. With that title, Sister Helen recalls for us the fact that in the deepest sense we are all dead men walking and dead women walking. She reminds us that someday each of us clay jars will indeed crumble and die.

She knows too that all of us clay jars also feel like Matthew Poncelet at least some of the time. Like him, we all have our moments when we could swear that, "Nobody ever called me no son of God or no daughter of God before. They called me a daughter or a son-of-a-you-know-what a lotta times, but never no daughter of God, never no son of God."

But then comes the truth that sets us free- namely, that *Someone has now called us this*. In Jesus Christ, *God* has said to each one of us, "I'll be the face of love for you forever. You are my son. You are my daughter. *You are a child of God.*"

With this treasure in the clay jars that we are, we are set free. We're freed to be the face of love for each other and for all God's children. Amen!