

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 6, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“TRUST JESUS AND ELVIS”

Scripture Readings:

Exodus 12:1–14 Psalm 149 Romans 13:8–14 John 20: 24-29

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I am cheating a little bit this morning – I am using my “*travelling sermon*” from a few years ago.

I have used it a couple of times when I was invited to be a guest preacher.

It isn’t based on the lectionary readings for today.

I haven’t travelled extensively in the United States, but I have been to North Carolina on two occasions.

Among other things, I went to the World Golf Hall of Fame, and tried what folks there call “*Barbecue*”.

It was pretty good. I asked one of them what is in it - He said “*You don’t really want to know*”

Susan Sparks, Memphis, Tennessee

Now, for those of you who are not Southerners, please understand BBQ is a holy thing. In fact, it is part of what we call the southern trinity: **BBQ, Basketball, and the Bible.**

[**NOTE:** In the part of North Carolina I visited, the trinity is: *Golf, Basketball, and Horses.*]

Memphis is known for their BBQ, especially their ribs.

As my neighbor used to say, “*Good ribs would make an angel weep.*”

Now BBQ is not the only reason Memphis is considered holy land.

The primary reason, *of course*, is because it is the home of **Elvis**.

I am not a huge Elvis fan, but I prefer leather jacket Elvis over white sparkly jumpsuit Elvis.

S. Sparks:

While we were in Memphis, we visited Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first song.

In the studio, there was an “X” marked on the floor with duct tape indicating the exact spot where Elvis stood.

The tour guide told us that just the week before, Bob Dylan had come into the studio, said not a word to anyone, walked over to the “X,” got down on all fours, kissed it and walked out.

For many, Elvis has reached an almost holy status.

In fact, there has been studies on the parallels between Jesus and Elvis, most notably by the renowned scholar (and standup comedian) Adam Sandler.

He explains:

- Jesus said: "Love thy neighbor." (Matthew 22:39); Elvis said: "Don't be cruel." (RCA, 1956).
- Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis' first band was a trio.
- Jesus is the Lord's shepherd; Elvis dated Cybill Shepherd.

Given that kind of reverence, I believe that Jesus fans, have a lot to learn from Elvis fans.

Especially in terms of faith....

Now – this will sound like a goofy premise – but stick with me for a few minutes

Susan Sparks:

Like any good pilgrims, we took time on our Memphis trip to visit the shrine of Graceland.

There was the great welcome sign--a twenty-five-foot-high Elvis saying, "*Welcome to the Blingdom!*"

And after the requisite photographs, we got in line for tickets.

As we were waiting, I turned to one of the tour guides and asked,
"So, how long did Elvis actually live here?"

There was an audible gasp from the surrounding crowd.

The guide looked at me with shock and whispered,
"We don't use the past tense here."

She then pointed at her t-shirt, which read: "*Graceland, where Elvis LIVES.*"

It didn't matter that she had never actually seen Elvis or that technically Elvis stopped walking the earth over 32 years ago. [43 years now]

It didn't matter.

She didn't care.

Elvis fans don't care.

Without any proof, they believe he lives!

Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

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People of God - It's a shame we don't all live our lives with that kind of faith.

I'm afraid that most of us tend more towards the disciple Thomas than the tour guide at Graceland.

Our Gospel scripture today is the familiar story of doubting Thomas.

There we find the disciples locked up behind closed doors after Jesus' crucifixion.

And Jesus came and stood among them.

When they saw him, the disciples rejoiced.

But Thomas was not there at the time.

When the other disciples later told Thomas about it, he said,
"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger ... in his side, I will not believe."

A week later, when Thomas was with the disciples, Jesus appears again and invites Thomas to touch his wounds.

When he put his hand in Jesus' side--**he knew**.

"My Lord and my God," said Thomas.

Jesus then said to him, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

We've all heard this story before.

More importantly, **we've all lived it.**

We've all had times in our lives where we've doubted, where we have said to God,
"Show me a sign! Give me some proof!"

Maybe it was because we were in a place of unbearable pain, or a time we faced hardship with no answers, a time when God seemed silent.

We have all been at that point where, like Thomas, we yearned for a sign from God. And why not?

We live in a world where "proof" trumps faith.

We send probes and robots with cameras to the farthest ends of the universe so we can know for sure what's out there.

We won't believe an assertion until a complicated mathematical equation says it's true.

And anytime – anytime -- there is a wall bearing a sign "wet paint," we will touch it just to be sure.

If only we could have the faith of Elvis fans, a faith driven not by empirical proof, but by the voice in our hearts.

Finding that kind of faith can change our lives.

For when you believe something in your heart, you begin to act it in your life.

Look at Elvis fans.

They not only believe he lives; they act like he lives.

For example, they are constantly looking for Elvis.

The Bible says seek and ye shall find.
Well, Elvis fans follow that to a tee.

They are constantly looking for the *King*.

And, sometimes, they find him.

There have been Elvis sightings all over the world--from a spa in Tokyo to a Burger King in Michigan.

There was even a woman who claimed that she found the image of Elvis in a taco shell.

If only we'd put even 1% of that kind of energy towards looking for Jesus, we might actually find him too.

Maybe we'd find him in the eyes of a little child or the downcast gaze of a homeless stranger.

Maybe we'd find him in the face of an enemy or the tears of a loved one with whom we are fighting.

If you believe he lives, you'll act like he lives. You'll look for him and you'll find him.

Another thing--Elvis fans believe he lives, so they look for others who believe as well, like through Elvis fan clubs.

Susan Sparks:

I heard a story on the Graceland tour about a woman who was in a fan club called "Taking Care of Business."

She had to have major surgery and afterwards received hundreds of cards and letters from "Elvis friends" all over the world.

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We Christians can learn something from this.

Community is what gives us strength, support and focus in times we need it most. Finding families of faith is what helps us keep our faith.

*If you **believe** he lives, you'll look for **others** who believe as well.*

Here's a third example, and probably the most important.

Because they believe he lives, Elvis fans go out into in the world and share his message.

They play Elvis' music; they dress up as Elvis impersonators; they decorate their homes with Elvis memorabilia.

I saw a car a few years ago with a bumper sticker ELVIS LIVES

The farmer's market in Woodstock had an Elvis impersonator one Saturday.

Thunder Bay – Elvis impersonator – Daylin James – Apparently, when you talked to him, you couldn't always tell if you were talking to Daylin, or Elvis.

There is an **entire channel** on Sirius XM dedicated to Elvis!!!!

Susan Sparks:

One of my favorite things at the Graceland gift shop was an Elvis sprinkler.

It was a foot-high plastic Elvis in a sequin jumpsuit, and as he watered your yard, he would swivel his hips.

I have tried to find such an item on eBay, and Amazon – to no avail

Whether through word or music, impersonators or sprinklers, Elvis fans proudly proclaim the message of the King.

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This provides an interesting contrast to the disciples.

Before Jesus appeared in their midst, the book of John tells us that the disciples were in hiding behind locked doors.

- They weren't looking for Jesus.
- They weren't going around looking for other believers.
- They weren't out in the world preaching the word.
- They weren't proclaiming the message of the King.

They were hidden in fear, locked away in shame because they didn't believe he lived.

I'm afraid that many of us live a similar existence; a life with little or no faith in the risen Christ, our hearts locked up and closed away.

Susan Sparks:

A young woman on the tour told a story about how she grew up listening to Elvis.

Sadly, she lived through an abusive childhood, but she talked about how she used daydreams of Elvis as an escape.

"He was my safe space," she said, "my little corner of heaven."

Because she believed he lived, she honored him in her heart and that enabled her to find peace in the hardest of places.

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If only we would open our hearts to Jesus in the same way.

When we honor the risen Christ in our hearts, we have our own safe space, our own little corner of heaven in which to rest and to heal.

If you believe he lives--you'll act like he lives.

And Jesus' message is certainly a message of action.

Elvis apparently felt the same way.

For Elvis said early in his career, *"Music and religion are similar--because both should make you wanna move."*

The gospel is a living, vibrant force that should make us want to get out and move,

- move around in the world,
- move towards each other in love and compassion,

- move towards bringing in the kingdom--or the blingdom--or whatever.

I want a religion that makes me wanna move.

I want a savior that makes me wanna put on a sequin jump suit and sing.

I want to believe in a Jesus that lives.

Don't let the doubts and fears of life shake your belief.

Don't let your faith be driven by anything but the voice of your heart.

Remember:

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

For if we believe he lives, our lives will change.

We will search for and find him;

we will proclaim his message;

we will honor his spirit with ours.

Sometime this week, find a quiet moment, ask yourself, "*Do you believe?*"

From the deepest parts of your heart, the answer will surely come:

He lives.

He lives, baby.

The King lives.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, KING, AND HOLY SPIRIT...AMEN

John 20: 24-29 - comment David Lose, ... 2016.

"Thomas comes to faith because he first has the chance to voice his doubt and questions and then experiences Jesus for himself. Perhaps the opportunity before us this week, Dear Partner, is provide the same opportunities for the many Thomases sitting in our pews."

Call to Worship (based on Romans 13: 8-14 and Matthew 18: 15-20)

People of God, open your eyes! Look around!

The presence of our Lord Jesus Christ is here—among us and within us.

God's salvation is close at hand—nearer than you know.

So, open your hearts and minds to the Spirit, and let's worship God together!

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, God of grace and glory, your creative power is beyond imagining.

Your love is wider than the whole universe; your mercy, greater than the heights of heaven; your wisdom, deeper than the sea.

Maker of all things, you became one of us in Jesus Christ, and through your Spirit you are present with us in every place and every time.

We worship you, Creator, Christ, and Spirit, one God, now and always,

Although Christ is among us as our peace, we confess we are a people divided, within ourselves and against each other.

We cling to the values and habits of a broken world.

The profit and pleasures we pursue harm creation and the lives of others.

The fears and jealousies we harbour set neighbour against neighbour, and nation against nation.

The freedom and abundance we enjoy belong mostly to a few, when they are God's gift to all.

Have mercy upon us, O God.

Heal us, forgive us, and set us free to serve you in the world as agents of your reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (inspired by Matthew 19: Psalm 139, Romans 8)

There is no place you can go, no end of the earth you can run,
where God cannot find you.

There is nothing on earth or beyond death that can separate you from the love of God in Christ
Jesus our Lord.

You are forgiven. You are loved. You are reconciled to God.

Go and live with the love of God. Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Creator of heaven and earth, lover of each and every soul, we are filled with gratitude for the blessings of this life.

For making us in your image to love and care for one another, we give you thanks.

For the gift of Christ, who redeems and guides us, and who gives us a pattern for everyday living, we praise you.

Hear us now as we pray for situations where your love and grace are sorely needed in the world you love.

We pray for the church in this place and around the world, facing so many new challenges to respond to so many enduring needs...

We pray for this beautiful planet, the fragile home we share with all living things...

For those who rule in this community, province, and country, and the nations of the world, that they may find the wisdom and courage to be thoughtful, careful, and just in the decisions they make...

For those who serve as teachers, healers and caregivers facing new situations this fall, and for all students who return to school in very different circumstances...

For the homeless and the hungry, for the unemployed and the anxious, and for all who have become more vulnerable through the pandemic...

For those who mourn and those who are alone or feeling isolated...

For the powerless and oppressed, and those caught up in destructive relationships or unjust political systems...

And for the concerns we bear on our hearts this day...

*PRAYER LIST – Donna Mellon, Laura Crozier, Bob Baron
Indigenous Lives, Black Lives, LGBTQ Lives,
the Lives of all your precious children*

Eternal God, we thank you for those who have gone ahead of us and showed us some measure of your eternal love.

Keep us always in communion with you, and with your people from every time and place.

So, we join our voices to theirs in the words Jesus taught us, saying:

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.*

Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.

*Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.*

Stewardship thought

Melody Beattie (1948 -), author

Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.

Commission & Benediction

(based on Romans 13: 8-14)

As you go from here, remember to love.

For love is what God asks of us;

it is the very heart and soul of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

So, go from here to love and serve God by loving and serving those you meet.

May God—who loved us first, and who showed us what real love looks like—
be with you and among you wherever
you find yourself in the coming week. Amen.