

Sunday, June 4, 2023
Matthew 28:16-20 Romans 5:1-8
“The Road to Hope”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. The risen Jesus, fully vested with divine authority, stands before his disciples with one final teaching. All authority has been given to Jesus, which is shared with the father and the spirit. And here in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus states what we call the “Great Commission” to his disciples, and to all of us – “go and make disciples of all nations.” Go and speak of your belief. I tried to find something humorous to start this sermon, but I don’t know about you, but speaking about my faith is maybe the most humorous part! How many of you perceive yourselves as called and sent to bear witness to your faith or even feel equipped to do so? How many of us when we hear these words are inspired and encouraged, or do we just feel a tad guilty and definitely ill-equipped?

As one pastor states, “so here’s the thing: because, as adults, we derive a great deal of our sense of ourselves from our areas of competence - - at work, at home, in volunteer activities or hobbies - - when we find ourselves in situations where we do not feel competent, our anxiety shoots through the roof. (This by the way, is why adults have a hard time learning a new language or musical instrument - - it’s not that our brains are too old or hardwired to learn something new; it’s that we can’t stand feeling incompetent and so quit before making much progress)”. Now, think about how often we have been invited to make connections between our faith and [our] life – especially by people like me your pastor – and to share that faith with others. Truth be told we don’t feel competent to fulfill anything remotely resembling Jesus’ commission.” (1)

And likewise, we don’t feel competent to speak about the events happening in the world around us in a way that could promote any kind of change, so most of us don’t. Most of us sit quietly with our thoughts or speak within our immediate family and friends, and just watch what is happening in our cities, in our towns. And we feel a tad guilty but more incompetent than anything. Who am I to say anything? Who am I to do anything?

But here is the hope, the hope we have in Jesus Christ is that we are not alone in this, and Jesus has not only commissioned us for this work, the work of witnessing to our faith and life, the work of speaking to injustice and inequality, but has promised to go out with us as we do it. With this being Pride Month, we need to be thinking about our injustice and inequality of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters in particular, because, if we don’t learn how to accept everyone – support and speak up for everyone – no matter what age, ethnic background, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, family configuration, economic circumstance, physical, cognitive or emotional abilities, educational, spiritual, religious or faith background or tradition – everyone; then we are not fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commission and we will not survive as a church. God is the one who loves the world, this world, our world, and who, unwilling to let it perish, gives the son, to rescue and restore the world. And God connects us to God’s son and the world by the spirit. That’s the trinity, that’s what is on our side.

As my favorite preaching professor’s Tom Long, once wrote, “Some people think of God as like a great big parent, a father or mother in the sky, or maybe a fearsome judge who stares down and makes us behave out of fear and guilt. Some other people think of God like a divine

clock maker who made creation, wound it up, and lets it tick away on its own. Other people think of God as like some distant star, cold, unblinking, shining out there somewhere but far away from us and our lives." But when we walk with God, "we discover that God is not a fearsome judge or a clockmaker or a distant star, but God is rather a community of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a living and dynamic communion of love and self-giving." (2)

What did I say last Sunday on Pentecost? The trinity wasn't ever separate – God always was and always is the creator, redeemer, sustainer – father, son, spirit. God isn't three separate gods; it's just that through different events in our time, God has been revealed to us in three distinct ways. To be a part of a church is to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit; to be open to its transforming power.

So, the setting of the Gospel of Matthew with Jesus stating this great commission is as always, some unnamed mountain where heaven and earth meet. That thin place where human meets the divine. Which is at the edge of a new world and a new time. My friends, this is where we are right now, between a new world and a new time for this congregation. And like us, the disciples stand at the edge of a world that is passing away and one that is coming to them, and they are confused and scared and feel incompetent. What does this new world look like? How do we adjust to the changes that are necessary to create a new community of followers? Jesus sends his disciples into the world not only to announce the salvation of humans, but to bear witness to the end of a broken creation. I believe we are being sent right now to do the same. Right now we have been commissioned to create a new way of being Christians, a new way of worshipping, a new way of serving, a new way of being church. And that can seem like a very scary, unknown road.

That new way, that new path, as the Apostle Paul describes in Romans, is walking on a road toward hope. Hope that leads into a greater understanding of God's love and Jesus' sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's gift of peace. But that road that leads to hope begins with suffering. Suffering and pain, loss and affliction. A road that requires endurance and patience. **But** it is also a road of character and integrity, of hope and peace, of grace. It is a path which can hopefully lead us to believe there is a God who guides and protects and loves and provides for us. It is not a bad road, but it is not a pretty one or a pleasant one.

In the time of Paul, it was very difficult to be a Christian, especially in Rome. In Paul's time a distinction was made between the present age, often marked by suffering and persecution, and the age to come when God's purposes would be completely realized. With the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul is telling the people, the power and consolation of God's future age is now present, just not fully because of their present sufferings.

We live in a time of suffering in many different ways, for some suffering comes in the form of uncertainty, uncertainty about the world, our lives, the economy, our health. It comes in the form of anger, anger at injustice, inequality, racism, sexism, judgement. And we must also recognize that for others, there are many others who suffer far greater than most of us, who suffer injustice, violence, oppression, and mistreatment on a daily basis. The kind of suffering and pain most of us cannot even begin to relate to.

At the beginning of our passage from Romans, Paul tells us we are justified by grace as a gift. We have been justified – that is **not** to say that we endure suffering because of something we did or didn't do. I don't know about you, but the God I believe in doesn't cause pain and suffering to prove a point, God doesn't cause suffering to make us change. Just as

righteousness and salvation isn't granted only to the most faithful. Thank goodness! Pain and suffering happen. Change is happening. But the grace we know is that when we are on that road, we are never alone.

And Paul goes on to tell us to boast or rejoice in our sufferings – does this make sense – rejoice in our suffering?! 6 million Jews incinerated in the furnaces of the Holocaust? Rejoice? 200 million slaughtered under Stalin in the Old Soviet Union? Boast? Over 3,000 killed on 9/11? Rejoice? Over 1 million dead because of the corona virus just in the US, almost 7 million in the world. Boast?

Yes, boast, rejoice. Rejoice, because the holy spirit can transform even the worst of human suffering into something good. You know the phrase, "all things work together for good for those who love God." God takes all things, all things, even the worst things and transforms them. We don't rejoice because we are suffering. We rejoice because we have hope. We rejoice even though we are suffering because we have hope. Hope from our Savior and others who hold us close, never to let us go. Hope that we too can take these things, these sufferings, these injustices and help create change.

On the walls of a concentration camp during the Holocaust, the following words were found scratched into the surface – "I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe in love, even when I feel it not. I believe in God, even when he is silent". A few years ago, I heard my son, along with his college choir, sing those beautiful words, words which have now been transformed into the most beautiful choral piece of memory. The Holy Spirit can transform.

And suffering? Suffering produces endurance. On the path of suffering, we may be filled with confusion, rage, heartbreak, doubt, weariness. We pray, cry, reach out, but standing in the grace of God, we can endure. The word for endurance here also means patience and courage. Patience, courage, endurance in adjusting to this new world being created all around us.

Because Paul tells us, endurance produces character. Now character is an interesting word here – it is a word associated with a refiner's fire, such as in purifying silver, whereby you create sterling silver. Gold becomes pure gold. Walking through the fires of life, the valleys of the shadow, character is how we handle the suffering. Enduring pain doesn't guarantee character but character doesn't happen without pain.

Many years ago, I remember standing in the parking lot of the hospital where my father was getting ready to be transferred into a Hospice Care facility to live out his final days. I was worried about my sister who just had a seizure. And I was returning the call of my doctor, when I heard her voice say, "I was studying the results of your latest mammogram and I think we should run a couple of further tests." It was at that moment, in that place, that I was placed on that path, that road. A path of trial, testing, pain, and grief. We have all been on that path, some of you are on that road right now. I remember having to pull over to the side of the road one day, because I couldn't remember where I was going or why I was even on that road. I was so frightened. It was then that I realized I was experiencing so much pain and fear and sorrow, that I needed help in processing it all. I got help, counselors, therapists can be a wonderful thing! So can, good test results!

I used this experience from my life in another sermon one time and a gentleman who had recently lost his wife came up to me and told me I needed to go back to that side of the road where I was lost. Go back to that spot. I thought it was a really strange idea, why go back to

the place where I had completely lost it. But that is what he meant. Go back and see how far you have come, how much you now have overcome and are now on a different path, not lost or alone, but found and hopeful. I will never completely understand that path, none of us can completely understand that road, but I have learned how to share, pray and speak in a brand-new way. We too are being transformed into a new creation. Suffering, endurance, character, hope.

Therefore, we can boast in our hope, rejoice in our hope. Hope doesn't disappoint us, fantasies disappoint us, wishful thinking disappoints us, dreams disappoint us, but hope does not. The fantasy that all things should always go well with us. The wishful thinking that we should always succeed in work, in marriage, in life. Dreams that there shall be no more hatred, war, starvation, unjust killing. These things will disappoint us. But hope, hope is always there. It doesn't disappoint us because the love of God is poured into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit – that is a free gift from God. Not a little spirit dabbed on our forehead – but it is poured into our hearts, filling them, transforming our relationships, our past, our future, if we believe.

No one can escape the path less traveled, the road of suffering, and once on that path, we may crawl and cower or we may run and hide. I still don't know how to share in public, how to speak about my opinions, how to speak my faith. But we must. We must change. And this starts small. It starts with becoming aware of our own biases, our own assumptions, our own prejudices. It starts by speaking out about our values and beliefs, writing, sharing, even if feeling incompetent.

Because this new world is being created and this gives us an opportunity to change everything. The way we believe and share that, the way we treat one another, the way we are church. When we are on that road of suffering, but are being led to the hope if we hold fast to the belief that God is always with us, we will find the sun. For the road to hope will lead us onto the road of glory, the road that will lead us home with God, eternally. May it be so, Amen.

1) Lose, The Rev. David. Reclaiming the Great Commission. 6/12/11.

2) Long, Rev. Dr. Thomas. "The Start of the Train, 6/3/12