

“Still With Us”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

Sunday, June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-28

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*Jesus commissions the disciples in the name of the triune God and reminds them that he is ever present with them as they live, move, and give witness to God in the world.*

For various reasons, some of us might say this is a hard Sunday to go to church.

Some would say, “look at the headlines! Look at the stories of pain and confusion. Look at the anger and hatred, the violence and the protests.” Some of them look around and conclude, “I’m going to take the Sunday off.”

Some would say, “When can we put this whole pandemic mess behind us? When can we return to our lives the way they were before? These folks are yearning for some sense of normalcy. They are weary of social isolation, of not hugging grandchildren. They are tired of wearing masks which are hot and scratchy. And they too are saying, “I am glad that I do not have either preach or go to church today.”

Some people are confused why more churches haven’t opened their doors on Sunday mornings. They are mad, angry, and they wonder, “Why don’t the churches open up? When is all of that going to happen.” Those folks, too, are saying, “You can have your sermon—I don’t want any part of it.”

Some would say, “Look at the divisions in our world—divisions of race, of class, of politics. These divisions are confusing and bewildering. These divisions are causing hurt and pain.” Those folks point to the divisions that are present everywhere -- online, in families, even among friends -- and they might say, “There are no words -- and I am glad that I am not the preacher.”

Other folks look at the calendar. On the Presbyterian Planning Calendar it says that today, the week after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday. Yes, an entire worship service centered around the confusing, complicated and never easy to explain doctrine of the Trinity -- God in three persons. There is no easy way to talk about the Trinity in a sermon -- which means that there are plenty of pastors who took the Sunday off. And they too are saying, “This is not going to be an easy sermon to preach.”

There are countless reasons why this might be a hard Sunday to either attend worship or preach a sermon.

We have grown weary of hot debates. We have no time for easy answers. We are not persuaded by staged responses or photo opps. Folding the Sunday paper, we sit back in our recliners and say, this is not an easy time. To borrow from James Weldon Johnson's hymn, "stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died."

Yet here we are: suffocating under the struggles of a world, struggling to breathe following weeks of social distancing and protests. It is a struggle to make sense of all that is happening. Gathered together, not in not around a single communion table, but around coffee tables and kitchen tables, couches and recliners--and some of you are still wearing your pajamas. I see you. I really do.

We are fatigued and perhaps even confused. Here on this hot and muggy Sunday in June, we are gathered much like those disciples who stood near their resurrected Lord. Matthew's final words in the gospel are a mixture of weariness, exhaustion, joy and anticipation. According to Matthew, the women who had met Jesus at the tomb were filled with mixtures of fear and great excitement. Later, all eleven are present, filled with adrenalin pumping anticipation and excitement—but also doubt.

This past week I was asked to lead a funeral for a young man who had taken his own life. Sadly, this is an invitation I receive with some regularity. Friends and family of the young man gathered to mourn and to honor his broken life...and just like the disciples, there were many who doubted. Like any of us, the family was filled with sadness and great doubt. They doubted God, they doubted themselves, they were wondering what they could have done.

No one knew what could or should be said – but yet there was also a sense of anticipation in the air, a yearning for some word of comfort or hope.

Theologian Karl Barth, writing in Germany in the early 1930s, looked around at all the struggles within his own nation. Barth, always writing with a bit of whimsy, says "On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to *happen*...expectancy is inherent in the whole situation." (Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp.105ff)

It doesn't matter, said Barth, whether that sense of expectancy is strong, or whether there are only two or three people gathered for worship. It doesn't matter whether the church is under attack or if the world is filled with struggle, what matters, he said, is that there are people who stream toward the church seeking answers. The minister leans forward, according to Barth, and then makes a bold declaration: God is present! God is present in your expectation and anticipation. God is present in this situation.

Then, almost unconsciously, the congregation's expectancy builds until finally they ask a great and ancient question: Is it true?

Fear and doubt, deep yearning, holy anticipation: this is what brings us to the mountain with the eleven this morning. We are weary of the pain we experience. We are disheartened by the injustices we see have witnessed. We are filled with excitement—but also doubt and great fear.

Matthew reminds us that this is the church that gathers before Jesus this morning. They wrestled with questions and doubts. Leaning forward, they look to see that hope which was beyond all hope.

Jesus had been faithful to the cross. He had seen past the lies of the present age and defeated death. He remained, as Matthew has been telling us, God-with-us.

And now he is sending them into the world, back down the mountain into the realities of their day to day life. He sends them back where there is strife and unrest, where the innocent are condemned, and the boot of Rome still presses against the necks of its citizens. He sends them with a command to do the long, hard work of teaching others. He calls them, says Tom Long, not to “hurl gospel leaflets into the wind or hold a rally in a stadium,” but to the “harder, less glamorous, more patient work of making disciples and building Christian communities.” (Long, *Matthew*, pp. 325-328)

It is not easy work. It means having the grace to listen to those whose opinions may grate into your skin. It means witnessing to the transforming love of Christ by dismantling systems of hatred. It means reminding a world that is headed to hell in a handbasket that God is still with us.

It means reminding ourselves that the empty places within us cannot be filled by anything other than the God who will always be with us.

This is the assurance Jesus offers to those gathered before him. He blesses them in the name of the triune God. Not some abstract theological formula, but the reminder that God, creator, redeemer, sustainer is one God in three persons who dwell in always loving community. This is the blessing that propels us back into the world every Sunday: to go where God has already started working, and to knowing that God is ever with us. I do not have easy to understand answers about the doctrine of the Trinity. But I do know this: it is in the promise of God’s presence with us that I experience the fullness of God as creator, redeemer, sustainer. It is in the promise that Jesus offers to be present with the disciples that I discover the call to stand in solidarity with those searching for hope. God exists in a community and calls us to respond to that community with loving action, faith, and grace.

God is with us. Amen.