

Seventh Sunday of Easter/May 24, 2020

Prelude

Call to Worship

At the presence of God, we rejoice:

glorifying the One who is Parent of all orphans.

In the presence of Jesus Christ, we listen:

to the Voice who calls us to humbly serve others.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we speak:

making God's love known to the world-forsaken in our midst.

Call to Reconciliation

We know what we are called to do, yet we often don't act. We know the words people need to hear, but sometimes we utter the ones that hurt them. Yet, we also know that if we confess our mistakes to God, we will receive forgiveness and hope. Please join me as we pray together:

Unison Prayer for Forgiveness

God of glory: we are so busy watching the skies for signs of your presence that we forget to look around to see those we can serve in your name. We are so intent on finding just the right way to tell off someone, that we forget the words of reconciliation you have taught to us. We are so convinced we can figure out your schedule that we forget to open ourselves to the presence of your Spirit within us.

Source of our lives, forgive us for all that we have done to others. Fill us with the wisdom to resist evil and negligence in our lives and strengthen us in that faith which is given to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Beloved friends in Christ, rest assured that God is gracious to all of us, restoring us to new life.

Believe the Good News of the Gospel:

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

Anthem

“Church in the Time of Pandemic...and Beyond”

Rev. Lynne Keel

Today, I gather with you in the pews...these particular pews that have served as a support to the faith lives of this congregation for nearly 100 years; these pews that have now been empty for eleven weeks by my count. These pews have been inhabited by many of you for so long that they feel as familiar as our own living room furniture. We have celebrated baptisms and weddings and confirmations and heard powerful sermons and ethereal music in these pews. We have wept and comforted and held one another in these pews. And yet today, they remain empty. For many among us, this feels like defeat, it feels like a crushing loss of our touchstone. You may feel robbed, you may feel restricted, you may feel depressed, you may feel utterly frustrated.

Understandably, we are getting restless and impatient. Even as we consider charts and curves and everchanging data, we collectively cry out, “How long, O Lord?” We miss our daily activities. We miss our freedom to move and breath freely and hug our loved ones. And of course, we miss our church family. So, we lift up all the questions: Do we reopen, When do we reopen, how do we reopen, what from our typical practices will go away, what will change, what will remain the same, what can we learn from this time and what would we sooner rather forget?

There’s a lot of debate and angst and polarization around these questions, but perhaps the most disheartening idea to me that is being floated around is that the church was ever closed in the first place. Yes, our buildings are closed. Our pews are empty, the choir cannot gather and rehearse, and these doors have remained closed. But the staff continues to work full time and over time, albeit remotely. Our church leaders continue to gather for meetings via zoom. And clearly, we continue to worship together online.

This morning’s scripture has a little something to say about the shape and witness of the church that transcends a global pandemic and any other crisis that could befall us. Today, we will be talking about the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven as recounted by Luke in the opening chapter of the book of Acts. In the forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus had appeared multiple times to the disciples and others and continued to teach about the kingdom of God. This morning’s text consists of Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he departed and offers the conclusion and postlude to his earthly ministry. I invite you to listen to God’s word to you in Acts 1:6-14:

Acts 1:6-14

⁶So when [the disciples] had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud

took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As we southerners are prone to say when we take pity on people, “Bless their hearts.” I’m speaking about the disciples, of course, because after ALL that has happened, they still don’t get IT, bless their hearts. And by all that has happened, I mean the story of Jesus’ life, his ministry, the calling of the 12, the miracles, the healings, the resurrections (including his own), the suffering, the tangling with powers and principalities, the betrayals, the capital punishment, the scattering of the disciples, an encounter with doubting Thomas; yet, after another 40 days with Jesus post-Resurrection to understand what happened, they lead off with, “So Jesus, is THIS the moment when Israel gets to go back to the glory days?” You see, even after all of that, after the massive re-framing Jesus was attempting to convey around the idea of the Kingdom of God, they were still stuck on this idea of the Kingdom of people. Their ideas of what power and faithfulness looked like involved images of King David and the power and freedom of a Chosen People who had been delivered from Egypt to become a Great Nation. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but Jesus’ ideas far transcended one group of people.

To his great credit, Jesus did not do a face palm or raise his voice or get sarcastic, like I might have done. He simply invited them to stay in their lanes, and focus on their own discipleship. The state of the nation of Israel was God’s business, and not theirs. He patiently reminded them one last time, this time for the people in the back: “YOU will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon YOU; and YOU will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Just as he was saying this, he was swept up to heaven in a cloud – the ultimate mic drop. And that inaugurated the beginning of the church.

Next, the disciples did what we would all probably do in that situation – stared dumbfounded at the sky. And because God knew these disciples (and us) so well, next we see two angelic figures who say something like “What are you looking at? Get to work!” From there, they returned to the Upper Room which was their home base for 40+ days (sound familiar?) and began to pray in preparation for the power they would receive from the Holy Spirit and this witnessing to the ends of the earth that they had been called to do.

So there it is....before Pentecost which is the official birthday of the church, before house churches and Constantine, before the split of the eastern and western churches, before creeds, and buildings, and denominations and theological treatises, there was a very simple shape to the church: Receive power from the Holy Spirit, be Jesus' witnesses to the end of the earth.

But how, pray tell, do we do church in a pandemic that requires isolation? Our fundamental understanding of church has always involved gathering the community, face-to-face interaction, singing, shaking hands, shoulder to shoulder filling the pews, potluck dinners, bible studies, and the like. With the suspension of the traditional trappings of church, it has thrown many church people into an identity crisis. Who are we without our choir and our friends and our weak coffee?

Behold, Church, God is doing a new thing! God has granted us power through the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Christ's love to the ends of the earth in NEW AND CREATIVE WAYS. We don't need these pews or these walls or these columns to be the church of Jesus Christ during a Pandemic or any other time for that matter. In fact, many would argue that these pews and walls and columns are a crutch, a distraction, holding us back from our true purpose and identity. All we need is the Holy Spirit and the power of witness and, perhaps, a decent Wi-Fi connection wouldn't hurt either. Our Presbyterian General Assembly Co-Moderator Cindy Kohlmann posted this last week on Facebook: "Do we want to use the resources of time, talent, and treasure available to us to figure out protocols and practicalities for opening buildings in a way that might help people stay safe but will not be guaranteed..."

Or...

Do we want to use the resources of time, talent, and treasure available to us to be the body of Christ dispersed and deployed until it is safe for all people to return to our buildings without restrictions?"

Churches in Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas among others have reopened in recent weeks only to shut back down again as members contracted the virus. On a Presbytery call a few weeks ago, one church offered that they were more focused in reopening in a spirit of celebration, rather than a spirit of caution. While our Session has appointed a re-opening task force to make recommendations, I suspect that it will be some time before we can safely open the doors and gather in the buildings again. Rest assured, however, that while the doors may remain shut, our church and our hearts remain wide open! So what are we waiting for? The Holy Spirit is on the move and we shall follow!!!!

So, you might be asking, how might we bear witness with so many restrictions in place? Well, before we venture out in the world, it starts with masks, handwashing, and social distancing. It breaks my heart that these life-saving tools have become politicized. It is not a partisan issue to love our neighbors. When we wear our masks in public, we are telling everyone we meet that we love them, that we care about their health and wellbeing more than our personal comfort. It is a way of honoring and protecting our matriarchs and patriarchs who have raised us and nurtured us, to thank those who work on the frontlines and risk their lives for us, to care for those who have compromised immune systems who also happen to be our teachers, preachers,

and workers. If it helps, think of the masks as being clothed with the garments of salvation. Think of handwashing as remembering your baptism and the ways the Spirit washes us clean every day. Think of social distancing as creating room and space for the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our world.

Now that we are ready to follow the Spirit's lead, let us look for the signs that the church is open and alive and well in our community. We are the church when we reach out to our friends and those who are grieving in our community. We are the church when we support and encourage our health care workers and call and check on the sick people in our community. We are the church when we collect food for the unemployed and hungry in our community. We are the church when we lift up and support the homeless and disenfranchised in our community. We are the church when we welcome and support immigrants in our community. We are the church when we commit to the work of Anti-Racism and discrimination of any kind.

Friends, this is the work that we've been training for our entire lives of faith. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with wanting to be back in these pews. To be sure, we will celebrate and shout Hallelujahs to God when we can safely gather again. But let us not allow a crisis like a Global Pandemic or partisan politics or clinging to the past trappings and ways of being church distract us from who we are and what we are called to do. We are a church that is filled to overflowing with money, time, and skills to participate in and bear witness to the power and love of God's kingdom here on earth. We have abundant "seed corn" that we've been investing and saving for a rainy day. Friends, it's a rainy day, literally and figuratively, here in America and around our world. The church is open, let's get to work! Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

O Giver of power and strength, you take a Quarantine-weary group of disciples and distracted followers and create a reborn community of servants who seek to do your will. We give you thanks for the power of your Spirit that renews our energy and creativity for seeking news ways to witness to your Kingdom.

O Keeper of all time, you call us to your side and give us a new vocation, by which we serve the broken places of the communities in which we live. As we continue to show love to our neighbors by wearing masks and making phone calls and delivering groceries, continue to draw our eyes to those in our midst whose suffering goes unnoticed. Guide us to the darkest corners that we may share light to all of your children.

O Constant Presence of hope, you strengthen us so that we may never give up or give in when confronted by the evil of selfishness and greed; While many in our leadership demand workers risk their precious human lives to save our economy, you continually pray for us that we may never quit when faithfulness proves to be a taller challenge than we ever imagined.

God in Community, Three in One, we lift our hearts to you, as we pray in the way Jesus taught,
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,

*thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.*

Charge and Benediction

The story of Christ's Ascension shows us how Jesus has paved a path to heaven from right here on earth. Let us receive the power of the Holy Spirit and bear witness to the ends of the earth that while our doors may be closed, the church is wide open. Hallelujah! Amen.