

5/10/20 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Morning Prayer –

God of love and of all creation, we come before you this morning as your grateful people. We have so much to be thankful for! Most importantly, we have our faith in you that is the deepest and most common bond between us. We have the good news of Jesus' life, his teachings, his death and resurrection that we share with one another and with the world.

God, this morning we are especially grateful for mothers who have give us birth and all those who have nurtured us. You have given us such tender care through mothers and those who have shown us your love with gentle provision.

Gracious God, we thank you for your countless gifts and your boundless goodness to us. We are especially grateful this morning as we mark the 4-year anniversary of Pete Flaming's heart transplant. That is nothing short of a medical miracle and we are so thankful for Pete's presence here with us. We are grateful for the good news received this week by both Mark Nikkel and Gene Hastings as they both move toward healing and recovery from cancer. We are grateful also for the healing that Pastor Juan's wife, Lupita has experienced.

We pray for your on-going care and presence with our brothers and sisters at Luz de Evangelio. Grant them safety, health, comfort and guidance as they navigate this time with fears and uncertainties that we cannot begin to know or understand. Be with those who live in places where there simply aren't enough resources to go around – enough food, enough medicine, enough health care facilities or workers. God, there are so many places around the world where people are in dire, life or death situations because there is scarcity. Let this be a time when generosity and compassion take the upper hand and those who have would be moved to reach out to those who have not.

O God, we pray this morning for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. We pray for Tom Hiebert and Ron Ediger and other friends and family of Alda Mae. We pray for the families of Jerri Schmidt and Rosella Duerksen. Comfort them in this time of loss when a brief graveside service needs to suffice and a more complete celebration of their loved ones' lives will need to come later. God, we pray for the family of Ahmaud Arbery, for his parents and siblings, his friends and community in Georgia. We pray that your mercy and justice would transform the fear and hate that lurks in the hearts of humanity.

We continue to pray, God, for all who are involved in learning and teaching here, at the end of this very strange semester. Give patience and perseverance as the students strive toward their final days and weeks of finishing their school work for this year. Grant them a sense of motivation and fulfillment as they wrap it up. Be also with teachers, parents, all who've been involved in a teaching role as they also give it their best through to the very end.

Be with us now, God, as we continue to worship, to learn, to sing and pray, to contemplate the words of scripture. Bless Pastor Caleb as he leads us in this time of study and thought. Open our minds and our hearts to receive your wisdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

“DISCIPLING” – PASTOR CALEB

As time moves on, we continue to pass important days by in the midst of a pandemic. We now celebrate Mother’s Day today, making adjustments with how you can gather with family, and we will pass future significant days with adjustments. Last week pastor Lois called this time “liminal space,” which means being at a threshold between life as it was before Covid and life as it will be after.

The first disciples of Jesus were at a threshold after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Things were about to change forever for them. Since Easter, we’ve been following the different encounters that the first disciples had with Jesus after his resurrection, as we remember that Jesus continues to stand with us, like he says in verse 20: “Surely I’m with you every day until the end of the age.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus promised the eleven inner-circle disciples would see him if they return to Galilee, where it all started. The mountain too is important. Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount from, well, a mount. Jesus went up a mountain to pray, and Jesus’ transfiguration was on a mountain. We don’t know which mountain this resurrection appearance took place on, but the times I’ve hiked to the top of a mountain, I certainly have felt like I’m on holy ground, closer to God.

When they see Jesus, the eleven worship him *and some doubt*. This is such a barebones account; we don’t have much to go on to understand what is really meant. Some of the eleven who saw Jesus and are worshipping him are also doubting what they’re seeing? Apparently. This is the same kind of doubting or hesitation that Peter felt as walked on water for a few brief moments before sinking. If you’ve ever been one to wish you could have Jesus right in front of you in order to “know for sure,” this tells you that you might still experience doubt.

There’s no indication that those who hesitate – I’d be questioning my sanity too – don’t also fully participate in the commissioning. Maybe faith is not about driving away all doubt but about what we choose to do with it. The simple question is: *with my hesitation*, am I willing to give myself, my life, to Jesus and to this community of faith? If it’s helpful, consider that we all end up giving our lives to something, so why not consider with both eyes open *what* I will give my life to? Do I see a more meaningful and compelling way to live than this? Putting it that way helps me feel more conviction alongside my questions.

In this short passage, Jesus authoritatively addresses the eleven with commands that will set the agenda for the rest of their lives.

Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach. These are a powerful set of verbs. The most literal possible translation of verse 19 is:

*“Going, **disciple** all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”*

True, that way of putting it sounds a little strange in English. We’ve often heard this as though the main action is to “go.” Go to another country as a missionary or go from door to door delivering tracts.

Yes, the “go” is there, but Jesus’ command is focused on what the disciples (and we) are to do as we go. We don’t stop being disciples or learners of Jesus, but at some point, we begin discipling and teaching others. Maybe we practice by discipling each other. The commission makes perfect sense in Matthew’s gospel where up to this point, Jesus alone has been the teacher with a small circle of

learners. Now those learners become as their Teacher, spreading the circle of learners to include people from every nation on earth.

In the New Testament, there is no special word for “Gentile” or “non-Jew.” Instead the word “nations” is the way writers talk about people outside of the people of Israel. We don’t realize what a big deal it was for a group of first-century Jews to wrap their brains around the idea that God was moving in such a big way through Jesus, that this was transforming news even for their pagan neighbors.

The main verb in this commission is “disciple.” Invite others to learn as you continue to learn. Jesus might have used other words like: “Go and proclaim my name to the nations.” Or “Go and win the nations for me.” But this is not about getting as many people as possible to join the “Christian camp.” The goal is not just an entrance ticket to heaven – it is to become a changed people that is infected with something contagious. The baptism Jesus talks about marks the threshold initiating us into a new life of ongoing discipleship.

Remember that Matthew is the same Gospel that gave us the Sermon on the Mount and that implores us to care for the “least of these.” Surely this is what Jesus means when he says “teaching them to obey everything I’ve commanded you.” If that all seems heavy, maybe that’s why Jesus finishes by assuring them, “Surely I am with you.”

Don’t let any of this feel too daunting, too heavy, or too discouraging. Being a disciple and discipling others is a journey. It starts with recognizing that we are broken people. Most of us need significant healing, especially healing from feelings of shame, before our defenses are shaken to the degree that God’s Spirit can transform us at that deeper level.

You might be wondering what the next steps are. The topic of mission and discipling brings to mind a book I read some years ago by a beloved teacher of mine, Alan Kreider, who has since passed away. His book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, studies the improbable growth of the early Church throughout the many cultures of the Roman Empire. The Christians didn’t commission official evangelists or have a mission strategy. Non-Christians weren’t welcome at their services in part because of fears of persecution. No one was compelled to join the churches, and some lost rights or privileges by becoming Christians.

What’s really interesting is that whenever the early Christian writers brought up this Great Commission passage from Matthew, they saw it as a task that had been fulfilled by the original apostles, and mostly were concerned with the reference to the trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, also found in verse 19.¹

Yet the early church grew, not sensationally, but steadily. Why? It might be because Christians learned patience along with other virtues in a way that it became reflexive and ingrained in their way of life. They were resilient and notably different and attractive. They didn’t expect to use force or control things, because they had faith in the God who raised Jesus to life.

Non-Christians and Christians formed relationships from working and living together. If outsiders inquired, Christians might invite them to meet teachers or begin the long process of catechesis. There’s

¹ Kreider, Alan. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: the improbable rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016; page 10.

evidence that Christian women were unofficial evangelists, talking about their faith, even as some church leaders worried they wouldn't communicate in orthodox ways.

The most direct example of mission in the Gospel of Matthew is when Jesus sent the 12 out without provisions. It was a powerless evangelism, not resting in some way on the power, privilege, influence, or clout of the evangelist.

It's not about replicating what Christians did back then, but just to observe and ponder what we can learn from this. Seeing that our mission is about discipling is both more challenging and at the same time potentially freeing. We don't need to be pushy salespeople. Our lives speak volumes, as does how we talk about what is important to us. Hopefully our neighbors get a sense that we have an inner patience and peace that lets us live for others rather than being imprisoned or consumed by our own anxieties.

This is a faith and an approach to life that is contagious. Hopefully this is even more contagious than the coronavirus. I'll admit that I don't feel like I'm quite there, and you may not either. We're on a journey.

If there's to be something contagious about our faith, it means that as a church we will be countercultural. Since we are in this season of a pandemic, I'll use that as an example of countercultural.

When our culture is tired of restrictions and eager to open back up as quickly as possible, maybe we reveal our faith by taking special care not to spread the virus, even when that means some personal sacrifice. We don't think about vulnerable people as "expendable" so that the economy can move forward. We know each person's livelihood is tremendously important and we desire to move forward, but we are also willing to make extra efforts to protect one another. Concern for the vulnerable is a key part of the gospel, as Matthew 25:35 commends those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite the stranger in, and visit the prisoner as doing these things for Jesus himself.

As a country, we certainly face dilemmas about how to balance reopening with saving lives, and I don't have the answers to this dilemma. I recognize that even being able to see the silver lining of the pandemic: slower pace of life, time to spend with family, etc. is an indication of being in a privileged position, as some are struggling to meet basic needs.

But rather than being rushed to get out of this crisis, we can learn from that early Christian patience, allowing this difficult and in-between moment to teach us, to make us generous, and even show us ways we need to change. Let's keep on this road even as the going gets tough. Jesus is with us.