

Sermon – “Raising Up and Sending Out”

Sunday, May 13, 2018

Scripture Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 and John 17:6-19

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Our first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles, and shows the disciples carrying on after Jesus is physically gone from them, having ascended into heaven. Listen for God’s word to you from Acts chapter 1, verses 15 through 17 and 21 through 26.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us — one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

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Our second reading comes to us from John’s Gospel. Listen to this passage from John 17, verses 6 through 19, in which we hear the words of Jesus, praying for his disciples on the night in which he will later be arrested before being crucified. Hear the Word of the Lord:

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

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I witnessed someone one time commenting to my mother about someone he found frustrating in the workplace. He described his frustration at having to regularly explain to this person the same thing more than once, and complained about how difficult it was to work with someone like that. My mom just sort of laughed, and replied “It’s a good thing you’re not a mother, then.” She explained that her job for the past couple of decades had sometimes felt like it was nothing *but* saying the same things to the same people over and over again, for years, in the blind hope that someday it would turn out to have been heard.

I hope that I have successfully absorbed few of those repeated parental admonitions. We’re all pretty good at resisting paying attention for surprisingly long time. I do think at least I’m pretty good at remembering to shut off the light when I leave a room now, so that’s something. In reality, although we do resist, and we do fail to pay attention, and we are almost infinitely forgetful, we cannot fail to absorb at least some of what comes to us from someone who bears with us personally, walking beside us intimately, for years.

And this aspect of mothering, the long, close companionship of teaching, shaping, and preparing, is not too far off from some of what we hear reflected in our Scripture readings today. In our first reading from the book of Acts, taking place after Jesus’s departure, the eleven remaining apostles choose a replacement for Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus to the authorities. But they don’t choose just anyone. They need someone who is, in effect, an immediate sibling as a follower of Christ, who has absorbed all the important things about the good news directly from their Lord. This is how they describe it: “[O]ne of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” They name two such people, and Mathias is chosen.¹

Our second reading, from the gospel of John, comes from the moments just before the arrest and crucifixion of the Lord. Jesus is about to depart from the disciples, and he is praying for them. And here we hear the agony and the hope expressed of that same kind of parent-like work. “[Y]ou gave them to me...” he prays, and some of his phrases sound just like the prayers of a mother who has carried her children along for all those years and now has to let them go. “I am asking on their behalf...I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them...so that they may be one. While I was with them, I protected them...I guarded them. But now I am coming

¹ See the story running from Acts 1:15 through 1:26 (text from *New Revised Standard Version*).

to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves...[T]he world has hated them... I'm not asking you to take them out of the world but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. Sanctify them in the truth.. As you have sent me into the world so I have sent them into the world.”² He has raised them up, and now he is sending them out, and he prays that they would be equal to the task of facing what is before them.

For parenting, whether literal parenting or the type of discipling Jesus has done for several years with his followers, is not just teaching, and repeatedly teaching, and repeatedly repeatedly teaching, for its own sake. It is about lifting people up and setting them on their own feet, people who in the beginning had to be taught that they even had their own feet and who long after that often did everything possible to avoid being set down on them.

Jesus knows that he is going away, very soon, and what he hopes for his disciples is a prayer of love. When they were baby Christians, he was present to calm the storm and the heavy seas of which they were afraid.³ But when he has ascended to heaven, and they are walking the roads themselves, carrying the good news of the gospel out into a harsh world, he knows there will be more storms and more heavy seas. And his ultimate joy, the thing he prays about for them, is not that they escape from these things and be pulled out of the world, but that they be made true and strong and that they be able to hold on to what they have learned to become, learned to love, learned to live by.

We are the successors of the disciples today, and that means that this reading is for us more than abstract storytelling and more than mere contemplative reflection. We have been raised up, carried along, taught, set on our feet here in this time and place. We are left to consider whether and how we, in our own lives, will remain true to what is true.

Presbyterian Outlook editor Jill Duffield discusses the difficulties of remaining faithful in her writings about this week's lectionary text, recognizing that we always face the temptation to wander away from the way of Christ and fall off the path we've been taught to follow, just like the 18-year-old, newly independent in a college dorm, practicing for the first time living by the things instilled in him or her without being reminded of them constantly by a parent. Duffield asks, “Why do we believers so often capitulate to the world rather than live the words received from our Lord?”

“Well,” she says, “if living in the way, the truth and the life was easy, Jesus would not have prayed so fervently for us on the cusp of the end of his earthly life. We forget that the door is narrow and that while Jesus' burden is light and his yoke is easy, bearing his cross means losing our lives.”⁴

² Excerpts are from John 17:6-19 (NRSV).

³ Quite literally, in Mark 4:35-41 and the parallel story in Matthew 8:23-27, as well as in Matthew 14:22-33.

⁴ “Looking into the Lectionary,” by Jill Duffield, published as an email newsletter by *The Presbyterian Outlook* on 5/7/2018. She references here Matthew 11:28-30, where Jesus proclaims, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Text from the NRSV).

She's right. It isn't a painless, undemanding thing. There is great joy in following Christ, but it is not always greatly comfortable. It means living according to one thing while being constantly hit in the face with something else. It means doing our own, seemingly endless repeating.

For we as Christians may know of something better than what the wisdom of this world preaches, and we may have encountered something better than the life that this world teaches; but no matter how many times we speak the same thing, how powerfully we tell of the good news, how often we demonstrate a life of servanthood and love, some days – maybe many of our days – it will feel as though we are shouting into a void, unheard, repeating ourselves endlessly in vain. And we will hear other voices competing with our own, voices offering desirable things and an easier life, and we will be tempted to throw our hands up and drop this whole business.

But surely so tempted also were all of those whose help, guidance, and teaching have brought us to all that we have found in life. Many of them, alas, have never gotten to fully know what they gave us. Yet we have only discovered the life truths we have discovered because they repeated themselves endlessly even when it seemed to be in vain.

So it may seem disheartening at times. But Christ prays for us as we work out how to live. The Lord sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. And God has raised up a whole body of believers, so that we might bear along with one another in both hardship and times of joy. And even more, we should remember that Jesus, in Matthew 28, after being raised from the dead, when sending the disciples out into all the kingdoms of the world, he made them a promise and reassurance: "And remember," he said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁵

Praise and thanks be to God; amen.

⁵ From Matthew 28:18-20 (*NRSV*).