

Sermon – “A Time of Transition”
Scripture – Psalm 133, John 20:19-31
Sunday, April 12, 2015
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading on this Second Sunday of Easter is found in Psalm 133. This Psalm attributed to David celebrates the gift of community. Precious oil is the symbol of joy and dew is nature’s compensation for her failure to give rain. This symbolizes refreshment and quickening in a desolate place. As the disciples and friends of Jesus come together during the awkward time following his resurrection, this Psalm hints at the gift of community that will grow out of their struggle. This is the word of God.

1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. 3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Our second scripture reading continues the events we read together last Sunday on Easter morning. Today we begin reading in John, chapter 20 verse 19 where we find the disciples in hiding, frightened and uncertain. Jesus makes two appearances...Thomas is only present on the second occasion. After Thomas sees the physical evidence, he responds with a phrase very familiar to the readers of John’s gospel. “My Lord and My God” was the faith statement of the Johannine community of believers. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The title of the sermon: “A Time of Transition”

The text: “A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you.’ ” John 20:26

Let us pray. Our Lord and our God, come to us in the in-between places of our lives when we find ourselves behind closed doors. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen

Life is full of change and, so, to be alive is to be moving in and out of times of transition. All of our transitions are precipitated by some event in our lives. However this event can have many faces. It can be a closed or an open door. Whatever the reason for transition, this time is always a little awkward and frightening precisely because we are experiencing something new. We are no longer standing on the security of the old. The foundation we have known and trusted has been removed. What is new may be equally reliable and even surpass the strength of the old but we do not yet know this. We need time to explore, to step lightly or heavily (depending on our individual personality) in order to find our own confidence.

Perhaps part of what makes parenting such a challenge is attempting to sustain our children through the times of transition which are a part of growing up. The world of the toddler (or what is affectionately known as the Terrible Twos) is probably our children's first encounter with change when they are asked to give up the secure world of being a baby. And this is terrible to the two-year old because this is a time of loss. It's an in-between, frightening time and their most common response is NO! As terrible as this time may be, it is an important transition from the world of the infant into the world of the child.

The next major time of transition according to human growth and development theory is puberty and adolescence. It's another time of saying no, another time of giving up what has just become comfortable in the world of the child. Adolescence is not an easy time for our children. When we understand this, we have more compassion for them during this time of transition; this in-between time.

Before we know it our adolescents are off to college to begin their final transition into adulthood where they are expected to live their lives without the physical presence of their parents. Although in their "remembering," the memories they carry with them in their hearts...the presence of their parents and home and church can sustain them through this time of transition.

And as we all know, transitions continue throughout our adult life. During those awkward times when we are called to make a change, to enter into a new season which is unknown to us, it's not uncommon to feel like and to respond like children. We hear ourselves saying and thinking "NO!"

The time between Easter morning and Pentecost (the season of Easter) was certainly a time of transition for the disciples of Jesus. There were 40 days between the resurrection of their Lord and his ascension, according to Christian tradition. Ten days following the ascension, on Pentecost, the spirit gave birth to Christ's church. In as much as Pentecost is a beginning for the disciples, Good Friday was the end of something very precious. The disciples would never walk the streets of Galilee with Jesus again, or listen to him teach or watch him hold little children in his arms. The comforting physical presence of their beloved friend and mentor would not again be a part of their experience. Needless to say this time of transition, this time of loss was a little awkward for the disciples. More than awkward...these men, and the women with them, were terrified and we would have been also.

Our tendency, not unlike the disciples, when we find ourselves in-between is to run and hide until the transition ends. We would prefer the time of transition to be quick and painless and yet we are told that this time lasts forty days. Forty is a symbolic number in scripture and usually refers to a necessary time for completion. Forty years the Israelites spent in the

wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. Forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry and now another forty...before Christ's return to the Father.

Why is this period of transition necessary? And why is it that we feel compelled to bypass the transitions in our lives, or feel guilty and embarrassed by them? Even though our head acknowledges that unless we experience these times we will not grow or move on, our gut resists them.

Over the years, the church has not done justice in acknowledging our own difficult transitions. And so, rather than allow these disciples to have their awkwardness, rather than understand why they were hiding behind closed doors, *for fear on the evening of this first day, but also a week later still hiding*, we read passages such as these and our first inclination is to criticize Thomas whom we have come to know as *Doubting Thomas*. Why do we seek to criticize Thomas for his uncompromising honesty and for the ease with which he acknowledges his own uncertainty in his uncanny NO? He only asked to see what the others had already seen. And my friends, if we are criticizing Thomas, what sort of judgments and unrealistic expectations are we putting on ourselves?

When we refuse to honor the in-between places and times of transition in our own lives we often prolong them. We become stuck and afraid to move forward, refusing to ask questions for fear we might expose our uneasiness or filling our days with so much activity we never sit long enough "the doors being shut" for our Lord to meet us at the threshold of change.

In Celtic mythology, the in-between places, those times of transition, neither one thing, nor the other are symbolized by doorways, shorelines, dusk and dawn. These are places of power, where the extraordinary is possible. Because in-between places are places of light, they are sometimes referred to as a liminal space. The word "liminal" comes from the Latin word *limens*, meaning literally, "threshold."

According to Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Priest and Founding Director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, an in-between place is...*a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. An in-between place is when we have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else...it is when we are between our old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If we are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, we will run...anything to flee the cloud of unknowing.*

Whatever the transition may be for each of us, when we find ourselves in the awkwardness of an in-between place, in the privacy of our own room, "the doors being shut," may we have the same uncompromising honesty with God as Thomas did and the courage to stay long enough in the ambiguity for our Risen Savior to meet us at the threshold of a new beginning. May we persist until we see and touch the wounds of God's love and may we persevere until the Holy Spirit is breathed into our very being. So that like Thomas, we may proclaim *my Lord and my God*, with joy, strength and confidence for whatever lies on the other side of that closed door. Alleluia! Amen.