

June 21, 2020

“Daring Discipleship in Uncertain Times”

Psalm 86:1-7. Matthew 10:16-20 and 26-31

I woke up in the middle of the night one night this week, fretting over the task of composing this week’s sermon. It is persistently humbling in these difficult times to write a message worthy of, and truly pertinent to, the times we are living in. Perhaps it is something lacking in my own faith, but I have never found it possible to “simply” preach the Good News of the Gospel. To me, the Gospel message has never been simple—just as human life is never simple. All too often, the Gospel has been misappropriated for personal aims or taken at what is belligerently declared as “face value.” To me, both the Hebrew writings and the Gospel message hold profound eternal mysteries that ask each human soul in each generation to conscientiously and creatively tease forth into newness of life.. Each time I sit down to write a sermon, I ask myself what I am called to do. I wrestle with whether I am being called to unpack the historical and literary background of the scripture text, to pinpoint its most essential message, to address the profound suffering and important social turmoil of our time, to be sensitive to the individual emotional and physical struggles of this particular congregation, to be honest and yet hopeful, challenging and yet comforting, to speak of universal realities and yet connect intimately to the lived reality in the heart of each one of you.

For some reason at four in the morning I began ruminating on my early lessons in English grammar; first, second and third person, singular and plural, present tense  
Singular--I go, you go, he, she it goes.  
Plural—We go, you go, they go.

No, really, I did. I thought about how the subject in the second person, the one directly addressing another person, “you,” doesn’t change when “you” goes from singular to plural. Each of you go, and all of you go. “You” as a subject is both singular and plural, individual and collective. As an object this is also true. Not me or us, or him, her, it or them but simply, you.

So when I speak to “you” this morning, it is built right into our language that this will be necessarily ambiguous to everyone. Is my message to each one of you or to all of you? Is it important to you personally or are you being invited into a collective awareness? The answer must, of course, be both and the possibility of my doing this adequately will be almost nil.

Each of us have had experiences this week (or for that matter throughout our whole lives) which have brought us uniquely to this moment in time with our different needs and hopes, perceptions and purposes, hurts, losses, triumphs, interests, passions, wounds and gifts. The words of anything I or you might speak (there goes that ambiguous “you” again) are heard differently by everyone. We know this is the case in our own lives, so it makes sense that it would certainly also be true of the words of the Hebrew prophets, of Jesus, and of the followers of Jesus, as writers of the sacred texts. This makes the words no less true; it just reminds us that their work is never finished and complete. It is never done, and it cannot finally ever be *done* for us. It is our task, our daring task, to study them, to ponder them, to turn to resources of ones wiser than ourselves, to pray for discernment, to discuss the meaning with others, to be skeptical about those who insist on easy answers and to allow the spirit that abides in the prophecies and parables to come to us freshly new and alive at different circumstances and different times in our lives.

When Jesus sent out the first twelve disciples, he gave them instructions with curious detail about what to do, how to speak, when to walk away, what to trust, what not to fear. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings.” When you get a chance, read the whole 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of

Matthew. It is densely packed and not effortlessly understood. Let it speak to you as if you are hearing it for the first time. Jesus is warning his disciples of what will occur in their future ministry, preparing them for the arduous journey of disillusionment and abuse, of insecurity and hesitancy of speech. He doesn't sugar coat his warnings at all, and for some reason, despite the painful prognosis of what is ahead, his disciples still stick around. But what else is being said? I have found in my years of writing sermons, even ones on the same passage in the lectionary's three-year cycle, that each time a new focus emerges, a new message is formed—a new understanding shines into life.

Jesus asks those he has chosen to carry his message into the world, not to lead with fear. "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." Fear paralyzes us. It blinds us. It saps our spirit. Finally, it can brutalize us and make brutes out of us as we see in racism and nationalism. In this trying time, I am aware of how much fear many of us live in a great deal of the time. With Covid 19's lethal contagiousness, caution is warranted, disciplined carefulness is necessary. But being twisted into knots with fear cripples our humanity, aborts real creativity, makes loving and compassionate action impossible. I have also, however, been humbled by the courage of so many, to keep on keeping on with their work as health care providers, caregivers in nursing homes, essential workers holding our whole social structure together. I have been in awe of the young and not so young that have taken to the streets, black and white, exposing themselves to risk of disease and of violence, because they, as a body of humanity, believe in something bigger than their own immediate safety. For the people of color, giving up is not an option. They are fighting for their lives and the lives of their children, the next generation. They are speaking out for the honor of their ancestors who were beaten down in body and spirit, many who were enslaved. Jesus said, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

Back to "you" as both singular and plural. The world as many of us have known it is falling apart. Profound changes are happening and will continue to happen *to us*, *around us*, and if we are wise, *within us*. Our image of being self-contained, self-sufficient, self-made individuals is breaking apart. We, a relatively very few, have lived privileged lives--living under the assumption that we are entitled to all that we have, the shelter, the food, the education, medical care and the sense of relative safety as we go about our lives. Many of us are grateful to God and give prayerful thanks. But too few of us realize that it is not okay, to separate ourselves from the dark underbelly of injustice, racism and poverty that so many of the world live in. We have held up rugged individualism as an ideal and that ideal is now crumbling and exposing the greed and bigotry. Our pluralist culture cannot contain it. The central Christian message doesn't allow it. Christ's life displays and his words proclaim, that we are *one body* in the spirit. How is it that we can take our individual body with its wonderful and unique experiences and expressions, a body that gives us the ability to taste and smell and touch, that experiences its own personal pain, pleasure, longing, and aspirations—how is it that we can live in both this body as well as the "one body in the spirit?" What does it mean for life as we know it to take seriously and viscerally, and faithfully, the call to be one body in spirit—in awareness, in compassion, in service to each other?

Juneteenth was the day, a full two and a half years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, when Union Army General Gordon Granger and his men rode into Galveston, Texas, and announced that the Civil war was over and all slaves were freed. Thanks to the youth for coming out to ring the bell for racial justice on Juneteenth and to those who were there to witness this. To our denomination, the United Church of Christ, held a Webinar to commemorate Juneteenth, this week, entitled "And Still We Rise." . On this webinar, many African American clergy and leaders spoke, and their messages were eloquent and moving. A recording of a sermon by Dr. Rev. Otis Moss of Trinity UCC in Chicago, given the Sunday after the killing of George Floyd, passionately spoke to a line from a familiar protest song, "We Shall Overcome, Someday," asking "When is someday?" What will it take from us for the someday of justice to arrive. When, for God's sake will someday be today? But

probably the piece, that affected me the most was a display of a collection of old postcards, each with a picture of a lynching of a black man, woman or child. In many, the white crowd stood around, smug and sure of their place, gazing on the lifeless corpse, hanging from a tree or bridge, almost like dogs after a hunt. It was haunting to look at these, the suffering and the cruelty, but it felt important to do so on this day of remembrance. It filled my heart with the courage of deep pain and compassion. The pain that is being taken to the streets by our black brothers and sisters is today is real and it is personal. It is centuries old, passed down from generation to generation in their very bones. Many of the marchers are called by their faith to resist injustice and to insist on social change. Their lives matter to God. How do, those who have lived as an underclass, facing the social limitations that racism has put on their lives in housing, education, job opportunity, medical care, and unequal justice before the law hear the words of Jesus when he asks, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." "Your father", the hairs of "your" head. "You" are of value. Marching together on the streets, singing and chanting and speaking out their resistance to the cruelty of white supremacy, standing up for liberation, insisting on change of the status quo, they must hear the life-giving power of Jesus' words. You are both intimately, as individual souls, and collectively, as people of color, worthy of God's love. Resistance should not be a scary or undesirable word to any of us for or that which is good *must* resist evil.

The Psalmist offers a prayer for the suffering of his time and our own.

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.  
In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.

Christ came to make all things new. That the kingdom might come, that the world might believe, that the powerful might stumble, that the humble might be raised up, Christ came in loving spirit. Christ came to make all things new. When we open ourselves to the newness of God's Spirit, "Someday," must be "today."