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Bethel UCC
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John 14:15-21

“We Are Not Alone”

Well, good morning, church.

I had a professor in seminary, Dr. Greg Ellison, who started most of his lectures by going around the classroom making deep eye contact with each student.

He did that when he preached in chapel too, which always unnerved the visitors.

As he went, he would say,

“It is GOOD to see you.”

Church, we are learning in the midst of a pandemic how to worship together, when we’re apart. We are learning how to still find powerful, meaningful moments of connection.

These moments, these hours, aren’t flippant or easy breezy.

They demand something of us. They demand vulnerability. They demand honesty. They demand presence. They demand US.

Church, it is GOOD to see you.

It is not easy, it is not simple, it is not even necessarily joyful, but it is GOOD to see you.

It is good to be seen and IT. IS. GOOD. to see you.

Let us pray:

Holy God – you who do not leave us orphaned, you who call us to your commandment to love one another as you love us – be here now, as we gather together but a part. May your spirit strengthen us and nourish us for the journey ahead. In your many holy names, we pray. Amen.

Sometimes, I imagine what Jesus must have looked like sitting around that table with the disciples, sharing these long goodbyes.

Sad, steady? anguished, calm? Probably all of the above.

This week, however, mostly I've found myself wondering what the disciples must have looked like.

Stricken? Scared? Shifty?

I'm guessing most of them refused to meet Jesus' eyes. It would've made the conversation all too real.

I can tell you what I would've been doing: clearing the table. Washing dishes. Anything to avoid the uncomfortable conversation and painful looks of Jesus.

But here's the thing: if I had gone with my instincts, to numb out, to avoid, to disengage, to retreat – I would've missed the most important parts of this whole thing.

The chance to say goodbye on our terms. The chance to say the most important part, the part that will matter long after the current present ceases to exist.

I would've been so ready to escape the pain, I would've wound up missing everything that might have healed me.

Jesus gathers the disciples for these last, lingering words. And in them, he leaves promises. And he leaves guidance for the tough times ahead.

He reminds them to keep his commandment. And just for clarity's sake – in case you don't remember – the commandment he leaves them with a few moments earlier is this:

“Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”¹

Love each other. Love me yes, the world yes, but each other. That's how people will recognize you as my followers, by the way you treat one another. The love you share with each other.

And then the promise:

“I won't leave you as orphans.”

“The Spirit of Truth will come to you as a companion, as an advocate.”

“And on that day, you will know that I am in the Father, you are in me, and I am in you.”²

Listen to that last one carefully.

¹ John 13:34-35

² John 14:18, 16-17, 20

On that day, you will know.

Our knowing will happen on that day, when Jesus comes to us, which could be any day... but the fact that Jesus is in the Father, we are in Jesus and that Jesus, God, is in us??

That is happening now. Not some far off day in the future.

That is happening in our present now.

In the midst of this pandemic.

In the quiet ache of our lonely homes. In the exhausting chaos of our crowded ones.

In the silver linings of a strange time when worshipping with a community scattered all over the world becomes a possibility and, in the grief,-filled reality that our world may not ever return to the “normal” we once knew.

God is in US. And we are in God.

So, when you can, if you can – even if it’s just a moment to breathe – remind yourself of that promise. God is IN you. The Holy Spirit, the companion, the Spirit of Truth, lives with you.

One of the gifts of this pandemic time, for me, has been the opportunity to engage in a few different learning opportunities, made more readily available as everything moved online.

One of the programs I’m learning from is called, “Countering White Nationalism.” Every two weeks, about 100 participants from all across Oregon and parts of Washington gather to learn more about white nationalism and its influence on so much of our communal life.

Last week, our speaker, a young Latina woman living in San Antonio, made what is probably a fairly obvious point, but it set off a lightbulb in my head.

“The forces of white supremacy and white nationalism, which support racism and sexism and homophobia, and the status quo in this country, have been extremely well funded and powerful for centuries in this country.”

Farming-working communities, immigrant communities, African-American communities, all of the communities who have been pushed to the margins of this country have always been the underdogs.

Their fight for justice has always been against enemies much stronger – by the definitions of power in our world – than they are. It’s always been a lopsided fight.

Again, this should've been obvious. I've been doing anti-racism work for a while now. I consider myself fairly alert to the workings of injustice in this country.

But I was a child of 80s – I grew up in Seattle, in a progressive church, in a progressive city and went to schools where most people thought like me. The halls where I walked where wealthy and promoted inclusion and diversity.

I thought it was just a matter of time before the values I supported reigned supreme – that's the way the world works.

Intellectually, I've known it wasn't really going this way for a long time.

Heart-wise? I've held onto my hope.

And perhaps, my tendency to look away.

Until I heard her words reminding me of the strength and pervasiveness of the enemies of justice and inclusion and love.

Letting your heart lose hope doesn't feel good.

But what I'm starting to discover is that on the other side of hopelessness, when you let yourself go to that place, there is freedom.

There is freedom in finally letting your heart accept what your head knows.

The fight for justice is not a lopsided fight that sides with the vulnerable.

It is a lopsided fight of David and Goliath proportions. The halls of power and wealth stand strong and tall on Goliath's side.

The side I want to stand with is David's side.

The side of the disenfranchised, the weak, the vulnerable, the powerless.

Because that's where Jesus stands. And that makes it anything but powerless.

The work of loving one another, of fighting FOR one another, and trusting, knowing, that God is in each and every one of us – me and YOU and the people we don't like so much – it's hard work.

But it's important work. And it threatens the status quo.

I wasn't sure, I'm still not sure, what is going to happen to the church – “the church” right now. I think what happens to “the church” will look different in each context all across the world.

What I have come to know, to trust, is that what we're doing matters.

This gathering each week – sharing our joys, our grief, our hearts and our minds with one another – it's important.

And believe it or not, it's a threat to the powers that be.

This past week, zoom bombers got more savvy once again. Like internet trolls, these actors force their way into communities of faith, creating disruption and trauma, generating psychological attacks.

When I saw the news, I got frustrated and angry, and wondered why these people had so much times on their hands to engineer something so seemingly pointless and hurtful.

But here's the conclusion I drew yesterday in conversation with a loved one:

They're taking the time because it's not pointless. Our communities of faith are a real and actual threat to the way of life that they want to see come to pass.

Their attacks are not pointless, they're targeted. And to be clear, I'm not interested in taking on a persecuted mindset.

I am interested in this congregation, you Bethel Church, believing me when I say, what we're doing here matters.

We are loving and praying and trusting and hoping and staying in the liminal hard space that is NOW.

We are SEEING one another.

We are deepening our capacity for great acts of courage and witness.

We are learning to step into our own discomfort to see what it might have to teach us.

We are trying to love each other. Each day. Even when, especially when, it's hard.

And most of all, in this place, we are reminded, we are reminding each other, God is in us. We are in God.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Welcoming Our Youngest

So, in today's story from the Bible, Jesus is getting prepared to say goodbye to all the disciples. To his friends.

He knows that the days and months and years to come are going to be really hard ones for his friends, so he wants to be sure that they know he is leaving it to brave themselves.

Often when we think of God showing up in our lives, it's in the good places. The people we love and feel safe with, the things we have fun doing, the animals in our lives, maybe the outdoors.

But God is also showing up when things are really hard.

And sometimes those hard times are the times when we really need to be reminded that we aren't alone.

Have you ever been mad or sad or frustrated?

Have your parents or siblings have been mad or sad or frustrated?

Do you think God is showing up there too?

This week, I wonder if you might think of some places that the Holy Spirit, which is another one of our names for God, is showing up.

It might be the really good places that feel easy, or it might be places or times that feel hard.

A time for me that is hard is the moments right after worship is over. I want to be able to give you all hugs and eat a yummy cookie and see what you made in Sunday School or walk outside and look at the flowers together.

Today, after church, I'm going to try to see how God is showing up in that hard, lonely time. Will you guys do that too this week? Then if your parents are okay with it, maybe you can call me or send me a text and let me know what you noticed!

How does that sound?