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Bethel UCC
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Trinity Sunday Matthew 28:16-20

The Impossibility of God

Will you pray with me?

Triune God – of creation and body and intimate breath – may you be here this morning. May your still-speaking voice remind us of our call, remind us of the work, remind us of our belovedness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Well, dear ones, I'm not sure about you, but this has felt like a big week to me.

We're seeing peaceful protests and demonstrations take place in the smallest of towns, including our own.

And we're seeing outcomes which include significant changes to how our cities and communities are policed across the country.

We're seeing folks gather with masks and hand sanitizer, while others send support from home.

We're seeing the ongoing metamorphosis of a movement, the cries and hopes of thousands, the power of the people.

And we're really seeing just how far we still have to go.

This week has been one of those where I almost get dizzy from the roller-coaster of emotions.

Grief, joy, pain, hope, fatigue, guilt, HOPE a few more times, and sometimes, hopelessness.

It can feel like a lot. Which makes sense, because being human can feel like a lot.

Walter Brueggemann says all 150 psalms in the Bible fit into three categories: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

Because, he says, all of life, falls into these three categories.

Orientation, disorientation, new orientation.

Right now – I'd say we're smack dab in disorientation.

It feels, to me, like we're in the centrifuge, spinning faster and faster toward our new reality.

Our new orientation is being shaped right now.

And no matter how chaotic the disorientation feels, the things we do in the midst of it, matter.

Each little bit, each protest, each mask, each conversation, each opening heart, each decision based on fear or love or a little bit of both will matter.

That's a lot of pressure.

But trust this, you aren't doing it alone.

The first disciples of Jesus know a little something about disorientation – about being tossed about in the centrifuge.

And this morning, we greet them right in the thick of it.

Or rather, right at the end of it, right in the seemingly endless transition between disorientation and new orientation.

A recap:

Jesus has been crucified. Killed in the most painful, the most shameful way the Roman Empire reserved for those they consider a threat to the empire. Crucifixion sends a message about who's in power, who's in control.

While sitting vigil at his tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, encounter an angel who tells them the news.

Jesus' body is not there. The one whom they nailed to the cross, the one who suffered the worst kind of death, he is risen. Go and tell the disciples.

The women go quickly to share this earth-shattering news, and on the way, they encountered Jesus. In flesh and blood! He tell them not to linger too long, but to tell the other disciples to head to Galilee.¹

And then we get the final verses of the whole Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus's commissioning of the disciples, his charge, his promise, his plan for the new orientation the disciples suddenly find themselves in.

¹ Matthew 27-28

And here's the thing about these final moments. They're anything but triumphant.

As preaching professor, Tom Long notes, this final scene is one of "near-comic irony."²

Jesus speaks to 11 bedraggled, confused disciples – not vast multitudes.

They gather at an unnamed mountain in the backwater town of Galilee – there's no glorious chorus hitting the perfect high note to punctuate Jesus' sermon – no stained glass.

Just 11 distressed people. Already missing one of their number from just a week prior.

11. Some of whom are still holding back – reasonably unsure of what to make of this risen teacher of theirs.

And yet, the commission is anything but prudent.

"Go out and make disciples of ALL nations." "Near and Far."

"Train them in this way of life and baptize them in the threefold name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

And trust, trust, trust that "I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

The impossibility of this charge is what we MUST note here – the very nature of this commission, the very impossibility of it throws the disciples utterly onto the mercy and strength of God.

11 scruffy, disoriented, powerless by the all usual trappings of the world, disciples to make disciples of all the nations?

Impossible.

But the impossible is always possible with God.

Today is Trinity Sunday.

It's a festival day – a day when we lift up our belief in the Triune God – who is one and who is three. Creator, Son, and Holy Ghost.

It's one of the more inexplicable and strange tenets of our Christian faith, but it's also the one that makes me hold to Christianity more tightly than anything else.

² Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, pg. 47

Because for me, the Trinity tells us one of the most important things about the nature of God.

God is innately relational.

God is never God alone. Separate. Distant. Apart.

God is always God in relationship. Interconnected. Interdependent.

There is no God that stands apart – unchanging, unmoved, invulnerable.

Our God is one who is utterly vulnerable. Who sacrifices power to show us, power-loving humans, another way to live.

Our God is one, who by her VERY nature, lives in relationship.

For too long, we humans, we Americans, have believed the lie of our own independence.

Each of us needs the other. Each of us belongs in kinship with the other.

Others of different skin colors, others of different experiences, others of different homelands.

Others of different species – the animal other, the plant other.

Our very humanness, our very createdness – which makes us vulnerable – demands that we live in interdependent relationship with the other.

Because we were created and we are beloved, by a God who is utterly relational.

A God who created creation so that relationship can blossom.

A God who walked the earth to show us how to live a human life of relationship and interdependence, equality and respect.

And a God who lives and breathes in each one of us, always calling us to recognize our dependence on one another, so that we will stand up for justice and peace for ALL of creation.

Friends, as we swirl about in the disorientation of the centrifuge, this is all I know to do:

Reach out to your neighbor. Your neighbor near and far.

Hold on tight. Perhaps not literally right now, but all the more reason to practice how to hold tight with your heart.

Have a discussion that shares your heart, not just small talk.

Read the books your neighbors have written, listen to their stories, learn from the experiences of someone who has walked a different journey from yours.

And while you're at it, listen to the trees in your yard, the birds and the bees and the four-footed creatures.

Observe how they rely on each other and then think about how you rely on them.

The idea that we are independent beings, free to consider only ourselves, free to care only for ourselves, is literally calling us.

And divorcing us from the God who created us.

When we decide we are independent beings, we expel ourselves from the Garden of Eden.

We forget we rely on all of creation. We forget we rely on each other.

We forget we rely on God.

We forget that we're vulnerable and then we tell ourselves all kinds of lies and make up all kinds of lies about others, in order to keep from ever feeling vulnerable.

But here's the kicker. Our God is a vulnerable God.

The nature of God is vulnerability. And strength. And compassion. That's what being in relationship is.

And that's the same work we ourselves are called too.

Even when, especially when, the road ahead, the road to new orientation, looks all but impossible.

As we adapt to life in a pandemic, taking some weighed risks, making choices for the safety of all in our communities, the road ahead may feel long and insurmountable.

When we truly face our history, the brutal history of African and Native Americans in this country, the road ahead of us that leads to justice and a future where all people are treated with respect and equality may feel overwhelming and impossible.

When we consider the divisions in our country and the forces of evil that celebrate the chance to use these divisions to spread violence and discord, the road ahead of us can feel dangerous and hopeless.

But I will tell you this:

The first disciples had a road ahead of them that looked impossible.

That looked hopeless.

The good news? Jesus promised them to be there, day after day after day, until the end of time.

Nothing is hopeless in these times of disorientation.

Everything is up for determining. Everything is possible.

Even with a bunch of exhausted, frightened, scraggly believers – anything is possible.

For God will be with us – day after day after day.

And as long as we remember that we don't walk this journey alone, the future will always be full of hope.

Amen.