

The Work of Resurrection October 4, 2020

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Texts: Reading: Exodus 17:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Before we reflect together today, I want to acknowledge that this week's news has been a lot to hold. The first presidential debate was stressful and disheartening and the news of President Trump and Melania testing positive for Covid has only introduced more uncertainty for our country and I expect some complicated feelings for us.

I would like to share some spiritual practices for after political chaos and destabilization that I read on Rev Heidi Heath's facebook page that I follow. As we continue to endure sustained crisis and trauma it is even more important to ground ourselves in practices that help us stay present to our own humanity and the humanity of others:

1. Breathe. Really. Long, deep, belly breaths. At least three in a row.
2. Hydrate. This also helps your heart rate.
3. Sleep. On a cellular level, we need this to heal, and keep going.
4. Lean into your hope muscles. Hope is a discipline. We have to practice it. Hope is not the same as optimism. It doesn't promise all is well when nothing is well, but helps us remember how to keep working for a better world.
5. Practice empathy. Empathy is a spiritual skill, and one that evil counts on being the first to go in an us vs. them fight. Don't let it.
6. Rage is holy. Hate is destructive. Rage can be sacred. It allows us to heal the world and be fueled for the revolution. Lean away from hate and practice tapping into your rage at injustice and harm to others. Then use it to begin the healing.

My deepest hope is that we can hold onto these practices in the days to come as we live through an unprecedented moment in our national history. Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In these months apart, I've started writing letters more often. To friends, and relatives, to First Church members and neighbors. There's something about the closeness that a letter provides, knowing that something that you've touched will be in another's hands soon is thrilling these days. Our passage this morning comes from Paul's Letter to the Phillipians. To fully understand Paul's contributions to the New Testament we have to understand, among other things, that he is writing letters. Letters by their very form emphasize some level of distance between the author and the listener; that there was a fair amount of distance between him and the church communities with which he was communicating. As the weeks of this period of figuring out how to do church in new ways pass by and as I reflect on more and more of Paul's letters in this time of uncertainty and transition, I like to think that we can have a companion in Paul, as he was in some ways on the forefront of innovation in the early days of the church himself. He too was thrown into circumstances that were less than ideal. He was writing from a prison cell after all. Paul gets plucked out of a life that he thought he had succeeded in and is now in a new reality and is looking towards a different future. He starts off this letter by bragging about his accomplishments in the past, saying "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more." Only a few lines later he calls these things that he was certain were valuable "rubbish" compared to what he is discovering in his relationship with Christ. He is learning to live in a time of transition and uncertainty for not only himself, but the communities with which he serves and with that comes a new understanding of his life and a new orientation to his ministry.

We at First Church are certainly learning to navigate this new normal of doing church differently. What seemed at first a temporary stop gap for a temporary crisis has now revealed itself to be something that will change us for good in ways we never expected. Part of my role as a second year pastoral associate is to help orient First Church to the ways in which we can connect with one another and with our wider community using technology, online formation, and social media.

Since I started focusing on this new aspect of my role I've had several people asking me the question, "what exactly is Digital Ministry?" The question makes sense because it kind of sounds like a made up word- perhaps because it's so new to us in the mainline church. Recently, I came across a helpful definition of Digital Ministry as "simply a willingness to innovate in service to Christ's Church¹." Another way this was put is our ability to "understand the communication of the current age. To seek ways in which we can incarnate the gospel of Jesus in the world in which we live." Just as Paul took to writing his letters we learned how to unmute ourselves on zoom and wrote a few letters ourselves too. Sometimes it's hard to come up with a description of what digital ministry is on its own because it's baked into everything we do as a church right now. It is the medium through which we are doing much of our ministry. When we can't gather together physically this medium has been vital to sustaining our life together and will continue to enrich our ministry even after we can gather together again. It has also been a big change, with a steep learning curve for us all. It is amazing to think about all that we have accomplished together with God's help. So far we have arranged a new sanctuary setup, started a new blog, patched in folks into the sanctuary on zoom from their homes, integrated pre-recorded videos into live streamed worship, experienced and participated in fully pre-recorded worship on our new YouTube channel, have had theological conversations in facebook comments, transitioned Sunday school and adult formation groups and discussions online, took the leap of singing in virtual choir experiments, have had two baptisms, a member joining and young adults confirmed-- all in some remote or hybrid format.

Even with everything going on in our lives over 70 First Churchers joined together on zoom to participate in faith and life groups this summer, a time when our church life tends to slow down. Our work in digital ministry is how we were able to be blessed by the words of Jean Dany and Danyson, the beautiful tones of Bertrand's music, and Beth's warm invitation to give of ourselves fully to this community today in worship. These are strange and trying times, but one thing is for certain: we have

continued to be the church for each other. Not only that, but during this time we have expanded our sense of who is a part of the church. On this World Communion Sunday we are grateful to have gotten to know folks joining us from out of state and for those who we don't even know yet, but who have been blessed by our larger online presence. There is some deep hope in the ability of the message of our faith in God to break through amidst all the chaos and to connect us with Christians who are far away physically but close to us in spirit.

In fact, I'm not sure if you have noticed but I'm finding that we have become more real with one another over the past several months. We are sharing more deeply, leaning on one another more fully, we are answering the question of "how are you" honestly and being present for the complete and messy answers. The turmoil of our wider world that has touched every part of our lives is opening us up in ways maybe we didn't even know we were missing. With more intimacy and unfamiliar ways of connection comes an opportunity of growth and stretching. This result of our digital ministry together often pushes us to places that we haven't dared go before. It leads us to the margins of our comfort zones. In a lot of ways in this season we are stepping into uncharted territory in our relationships with one another and in our understanding of ourselves. When we choose to delve deeper into our faith during seasons of wilderness like Paul, our eyes are opened to the necessity of confronting our suffering and also being open to the gifts of resurrection, knowing that our work is never fully complete. He says in regard to resurrection, "not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Our identity in Christ is our source of hope in these times when it just seems like we can't catch a break, when every part of our lives feels too hard.

This past week in a moment when I was "doom scrolling" on social media, reeling from the presidential debates and the state of the world, I stumbled upon an older episode of this devotional podcast I listen to often, called "Be Still and Go." The episode was called "I am a Jesus Person." The host said, about our Pauline passage for this morning, "Oh how we often skip to the resurrection....but a life spent with Jesus is a life of wilderness and suffering. Jesus is on the edges, the periphery, the margins. Jesus cries and bleeds and sweats. Jesus shares sacred moments in sacrilegious places with people who are holy because they are on the edges too....Where can we find the man who staked his tent on the outside of the outside of the outside?" She continues on..."Jesus is not to be found in the center but Jesus is still around. He has not left-- that's the whole easter idea. And what is Jesus doing there in the margins? in my margins, in your margins? The work of resurrection--slowly carefully with such concern for your sensitive parts, Jesus is doing the work of resurrection². As Paul says in his letter, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." These words broke my heart open this week. They are speaking out a truth that we are collectively discovering anew in this time. Whether the realities of multiple global crises have us feeling more powerfully the effects of living on the margins, or if those pressures have brought up things within ourselves that we have pushed to the margins of our hearts for far too long because it is so uncomfortable to confront them we are being forced to remain in these wilderness places, in these uncomfortable places, and to share in the sufferings that Paul speaks about in his letter. And as we dwell in these places together we are seeing our lives and faith from a new perspective and are looking towards a new future as the church.

Pauls' words about Christ in this passage and the words so beautifully spoken by this podcast host are reflecting back to us that when we sign up to walk with Christ we sign up for all of it. The hardship, the messiness, the grief, leaving behind what makes us comfortable in favor of what brings us closer to God. And at the same time in our walk with Christ even in our deepest despair we can hold on to the promise of resurrection. Not that we have achieved it fully as Paul notes, but that there is a promise of the surprise of new life even in the midst of our struggles and pain. We often live our lives with this

assumption of control and with this belief that we can prepare for what comes our way. It's been all too clear that we've had to let go of this false belief this year. Just as we can't prepare for life's great tragedies, we can try and prepare and prepare but we will never be fully prepared for the enormity of our hope in Christ and the grace of new life in unexpected places- in the familiar warm eyes of a masked face, in raising our hands in blessing on zoom, in the resources of our faith available online- whether that be a facebook post, podcast episode, or a Youtube video, and in the gift of continuing to follow God's call on our lives in community even now.

Footnotes:

1. <https://lenwilson.us/what-digital-ministry-means/>
2. <https://www.trcnyc.org/bsag-3-37/>(Amanda Meisenheimer)