

Fifth Sunday of Easter Year A 2020
May 10, 2020
Sermon

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” These are certainly important and challenging words for the world in which we live these days. There are plenty of things that are troubling—there are those things associated with the coronavirus—illness, death, limited medical supplies, isolation, anger and resentment, financial instability, and much more. Yet we also live with troubling situations at other times in our lives, even in the church, and even in the context of the rest of this passage from the Gospel of John.

There are people who have used today’s gospel reading as a means for converting other people to Christianity through fear. People read the part of the passage that says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father *except through me*,” and they decide that they better hurry up and convert other people to Christianity so that they don’t burn in hell. If a relationship with Jesus is the *only* way to salvation, then they want to make sure people know it.

Others read the end of this passage and are troubled. Jesus says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” People hear this passage, and they struggle with the fact that it seems many of their prayers have gone unanswered, even though it sounds like Jesus promises to do whatever we ask.

Scripture, life in the church, and the world around us can all leave us with troubled hearts, even if our hearts are troubled simply because we are confused trying to make sense of everything. It is nearly impossible to live entirely secure and carefree.

But I don’t think this is exactly what Jesus means. Jesus is speaking to his disciples in a very particular context. He is speaking to people who are already followers of Jesus in a time of uncertainty as Jesus approaches his crucifixion. Jesus is speaking specifically about the disciples’ lives in the future and the future mission of the church after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

In this context, the line about “No one comes to the Father except through me,” actually refers to a specific group of people, and could be better understood as, “None of you disciples comes to the Father except through me.” In this case, Jesus isn’t making a claim about religious exclusiveness, but he is saying that he will continue to be the Way for these disciples to be in relationship with God. Jesus is telling these disciples that their future is secure, and that they will continue to know God through the guidance that Jesus provides as the way, the truth, and the life.

Similarly, at the end of this passage, as Jesus says, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it,” Jesus is not providing a blanket statement for the disciples to ask for whatever they want. If we think this statement means that we can have free ice cream 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, or that Jesus will help us win the lottery, then we have confused Jesus with a genie. Prayer is not the same as rubbing a magic lamp to get our three wishes. At this point, Jesus is speaking specifically about the future mission of the church. As the disciples go on to share God’s compassion with all the ends of the earth, they will be guided by Christ, and Christ will provide for them in their ministry.

Does this mean that we can pray for Jesus to keep the building of Trinity Lutheran Church in Hillsdale, Michigan standing forever, and Jesus will promise to do it for us? No, unfortunately that’s not how it works. But we can pray for the Holy Spirit to continue to inspire

and guide the people of our community to continue to share God's unconditional love. God will never be absent from this community.

And so, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Our future, and the future of God's mission are secure. We will forever be in God's care, and there is a place for us in God's kingdom. Even as we face times of trouble and uncertainty, Jesus promises to guide us to that place where we may be in relationship with God and experience God's love and mercy for us.

Therefore, God sets us on a mission. Jesus was called to serve in a particular time and in a particular place. We, his disciples, are called to serve in our own time, and throughout all the world. We are called to declare that there is a place for all people in God's kingdom, and that God's compassion, God's unconditional love, extends to all people in every place and every time.

The Apostle Stephen was part of God's mission, as we heard in the reading from Acts today. Stephen was a disciple called to serve those that were hungry in his community and he proclaimed the presence of God. He faced persecution for his proclamation, but even still, he shared a message of love, faithfulness and forgiveness.

We may not all be called to work like Stephen. But we have all been gifted with the ability to share in God's mission through our own skills and talents. We are fed by God's word, and we are sent out into the world to share God's love with others through our words and our actions. We are called to welcome others as Christ welcomes us.

We practice this radical welcome and sharing of God's love as a church, as we are intentional about welcoming all people into our community. But we also need to be attentive to sharing God's love in our own lives with *anyone* who is in need. Jesus promises to be with us as we care for others, as we place the needs of our neighbor over our own desires, and as we defend those who have no voice. As our words and deeds proclaim that there is a place for all of these people in God's kingdom, and that God loves all people, we participate in God's mission for the world.

Jesus the Way promises to guide us on this journey, to walk with us in our mission, and to lead us and all of God's beloved children to the place in God's kingdom that God has prepared for each of us. Our lives are forever held in God's care. Thanks be to God. Amen.