

## FAITHFUL LIVING IN THE MEANTIME

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Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

Next Sunday is Pentecost, and our children, from preschoolers through Confirmation candidates, have been getting ready for it. May 11 will mark the culmination of two years of preparation by our Confirmands, who have been studying the tenants of their faith, and anticipating this day when they will reaffirm their baptismal vows, and in the presence of this gathered community, commit their lives to following Jesus.

In preparation for next Sunday's service, our children have been getting ready to lead the congregation in the lively hymn, "Baptized into the Death of Christ," including hand signs. Get ready—the signs come fast! And in all our classes the children have been learning about the dramatic events of Pentecost: the amazing day when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in wind and flame, when suddenly they could make themselves understood in many languages, and when 3000 people joined their community.

It was the birthday of the church. The kindergarten/first grade class has made a Happy Birthday banner to go up on a lounge bulletin board next Sunday, and today they will decorate cupcakes for a class birthday party.

So, according to the church calendar, next Sunday the church will be born. In anticipation of that event, all of today's scripture passages deal with the question: once born, what is the church to be about? How was the early church to act in between the time of Jesus' ascension to God, and the time of Christ's coming again, when the Realm of God would be fully established on the earth? And, more relevant to us, what are we, as the body of Christ today, to be about in this time when so much in our world is so very wrong? Will there really be a time when God's Beloved Community will exist among us? To borrow a phrase from the much-maligned Rev. Jeremiah Wright, how do we maintain the audacity to hope?

Let's look at what today's scripture passages have to teach us in response to these questions about the in between time. According to the reading from the first chapter of Acts, the disciples are hoping there won't be any in between time for them. "Lord," they say, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus answers that God's timetable is not something they can know, but that in the meantime, there's a calling for them and an invaluable aid in that calling. The Holy Spirit will come upon them, he promises, and they will be his witnesses, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So that is what we are to be about: to be Christ's witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. Many amazing people have taken that commission quite literally. I think of the Rev. David Simonson, a Lutheran pastor and missionary to Tanzania who raised the money for, and helped villagers to build, 2300 schools there. I am just beginning to read *Three Cups of Tea* (how many have read it?), the story of Greg Mortenson, whose parents were also missionaries in Tanzania. Perhaps it was Simonson's work that inspired Greg, who stumbled into an impoverished Pakistani village after a failed attempt to climb K2, and in the next decade built 55 schools, especially for girls, in the remote mountains of Pakistan.

But we don't have to go to Tanzania or Pakistan to be Christ's witnesses in the world. We witness to our faith when we support Elizabeth Gregory Home so it can offer a home and a loving, supportive community to homeless women. We witness to our faith when we support the Sanctuary Art Center as it welcomes homeless teens into a safe space where they can develop their artistic ability and come to feel good about themselves. And we witness to our faith when we support that Lutheran Public Policy Office as it works for systemic change so that all people in our state will have adequate housing, nutritious food, quality education, comprehensive healthcare, livable wages, and a sustainable lifestyle.

In the in between time, until the Realm of God is fully realized, we are called to be Christ's witnesses for love and justice in the world.

The reading from First Peter tells us what we can expect if we are, indeed, faithful witnesses. We can expect to be persecuted, he says. We can expect to be reviled. We can expect to suffer. All of these things happened to Jesus, so if we follow him, we can expect them to happen to us. But be glad and shout for joy, says the author, because in your suffering you will be blessed, and the Spirit of God will rest upon you.

The letter goes on to urge us to keep alert, resist the evil which is always around us, and be steadfast in our faith, knowing that our sisters and brothers in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. Nonetheless, the suffering will go on only for a little while, and the God of all grace will restore, support, and strengthen us.

Some of you who hear these words will know the truth of them right away. You know what it means to suffer because you have tried to faithfully follow Jesus. For others, these words may sound like they don't apply to us. This is not a country, after all, where Christians are persecuted, is it? No one would revile this congregation, would they?

Well, if we're not being reviled at the moment, maybe we need to look a little more deeply into how we're living out the Gospel these days.

During our forum at 11:00, The Rev. Rick Pribbernow will lead us in a conversation about implementing the Reconciling in Christ resolution we passed last year. I know that everyone here knows someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. If you know that person well, or if you are that person, you know something of the pain they have experienced over the years because of sexual orientation. You know about how they (or you) suffered as a child or teenager, realizing they were different and hearing their friends deride "queers," you know about what happened when they (or you) came out and were rejected by friends or family members. Perhaps they lost jobs or housing. Very likely their church told them they were going to hell. Perhaps, at some point, they considered suicide.

So, what is our responsibility to these our brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, parents, children, colleagues and friends? If we are faithful witnesses to Christ's passion for love and justice, we will stand with our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender friends, both inside this congregation and out. We will march in the Pride parade, holding our banners high. We will establish outreach programs for LGBT and questioning youth. We will perform marriages of same sex couples in our sanctuary. We will insist that our denomination ordain and support clergy who are in committed, faithful same sex relationships. We will come up with dozens of other ways to advocate, welcome and affirm our GLBT sisters and brothers.

And if these stands bring negative consequences, then let us suffer those consequences gladly, firm in the knowledge that the Spirit of God rests on us, and that the grace of God will restore and strengthen us.

So, what are we in the church called to be about in this in between time? We are called to be witnesses to the liberating love of Jesus Christ, and to stand firm in our resistance to evil, no matter how much suffering this stand may bring.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus prays, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine...Holy God, protect them...so that they may be one, as we are one." Jesus prays for us, that we might be intimately one with him, with God, and with one another. Given such oneness, what more could we ever need, to live faithfully into the dawning Realm of God? Amen.