

Sermon
The Third Sunday After Pentecost
June 18th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: GENESIS 18:1-15 (21:1-7); PSALM 116:1, 10-17; ROMANS 5:1-8;
MATTHEW 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

“So, friends, every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord. Love the world...”

“Ask the questions that have no answers.”

“Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.”

“Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts.” (Wendell Berry)

These are poet Wendell Berry’s words, from “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”.

Be joyful, even though you have considered all the facts.

Our Gospel passage today brings us the commissioning of the disciples from Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus has been on the move, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, curing every disease and sickness. We hear that he has compassion for the crowds gathered, because they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. We might expect Jesus to step in as shepherd, for the sake of these people. That’s not what he does, though. He commissions the disciples – and he commissions us! – to step into his shepherding sandals. Jesus didn’t come solve the world’s problems, but to empower and encourage his

followers to participate – as partners, not puppets! – in God’s work of love and redemption.

Jesus commissions and empowers the disciples to continue the work that he has been doing, but then he carries on to tell them what it’ll be like, and it’s not the prettiest picture, is it? There are some challenging and unpleasant facts about what it’ll be like. He sends the disciples out – to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves – and he asks them to be joyful even though they’ve considered all the facts.

The disciples went out, in that first century, even though they’d considered all the facts, and brought a new narrative to the world. A story of love and compassion. A story of justice and joy. A story of redemption, and connection, and relationship. We are called to tell that same story in this 21st century.

There was much in that first century world that didn’t align with being joyful, and the same is true today. Injustice and inequality. Racism, oppression, and violence. A rise in threats and actions of hate directed against members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community in the name of religion. Forest fires are burning. Wars rage. These are some of the facts.

How are we to be joyful even though we have considered all these facts?

We can be joyful by setting the good news of the Gospel alongside these facts.

We do that by doing as Jesus did. We can be joyful, even as we have considered all the facts, if we do as Jesus had the twelve do, and proclaim the good news that “the kingdom of heaven has come near”. We can be joyful even though we’ve considered all the facts if we tell the story of the Gospel: that love is stronger than fear, stronger than death.

Wendell Berry said to laugh. “Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.”

We can be joyful by joining Sarah as she laughs in the passage we heard from Genesis this morning, and by trusting that “no” is the answer to the question “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Notice how many times in this passage from Genesis, and in how many different ways laughter is mentioned. Sarah laughs to herself, unable to believe that she might have a child. Then she denies having laughed, fearful, and embarrassed. But then, she and Abraham *do* have a child, and they name him Isaac, which *means* “he will laugh, he will rejoice”, deriving from the Hebrew word meaning “to

laugh"! And later Sarah says "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (Gen 21:6)

Sarah's life was one with hard facts: barren for so many years that she could not believe she might have a child. But then, because nothing is too wonderful for God, her laughter of disbelief turned into laughter of joy. And so, we are invited to consider laughter in the midst of hard facts. We are invited to remember that nothing is too wonderful for God. We are invited to remember that the good news of the Gospel is that anywhere love or justice seem laughable, the Spirit is already at work, calling the church to join her!

On this eve of Juneteenth – June 19th – the celebration of the emancipation from enslavement in the United States in 1865 – Martin Luther King's words resonate:

"We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers. Our abundance has brought us neither peace of mind nor serenity of spirit."

An important part of the art of living together, one that we don't always talk about, is knowing ourselves. We have to trust that we are loved to face some of

the things we know about ourselves. This is where the words we heard from Romans this morning reverberate:

“...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

If we acknowledge that love, we can face challenge and suffering. We can face difficult truths.

The art of living together is not about co-existing and tolerating. It's about thriving, and flourishing. Loving, and being loved.

Anne Lamott says:

“Laughter is carbonated holiness”.

Part of the art of living together is laughter. How do we learn to laugh together, bubbling “carbonated holiness” in the midst of the hard facts of our world, our lives?

Before we can laugh with others, we have to be able to laugh at ourselves: we can only do this if we know ourselves, and if we trust that we are loved. We need to know – and trust – each other to be able to laugh together.

Our Gospel passage this week shows us Jesus as a healer, and preacher, who asks his followers to do the same. Jesus says “...proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'”. The good news that Jesus brings is that we are known and loved by God. We are known and loved, and we are to know and love others, to know and love all of creation.

The Gospel calls for a new narrative, and we as followers of Jesus are an integral part of that storytelling. Jesus’s life and ministry, his example, and his suffering, death and resurrection are our way, as Christians, to be joyful even though we’ve considered all the facts.

The narrative in the good news of the Gospel is that love is stronger than fear, stronger than death. It is up to us, as Christians, to proclaim that good news wherever we are. It is up to us to know ourselves, and to trust in God’s love enough to be able to laugh at ourselves. It is up to us to know others, to love them and to laugh with them, so that carbonated holiness bubbles everywhere.

I share with you a prayer from the Iona community:

O storyteller,

you sit me down

and fill me with tears and love

and laughter.

Come into my life, and tell your story through me.

(Ruth Burgess)

This is my prayer; may it be yours too. May this be our prayer at Ascension. May we be joyful even though we've considered all the facts. May we laugh with Sarah, and with each other, carbonated holiness bubbling all around us, as we tell God's story of love, compassion, justice, joy, redemption, connection and relationship, in Jesus name. Amen.