

When the Spirit Moves

A group of despondent believers huddle together in a room uncertain, afraid, oppressed, perhaps ready to give up. The weight of living in this broken world is too much, too much for anyone to handle. But then something happens. Everything changes. The world that was ending becomes a new beginning. The followers who were disheartened, in fear of their lives, now begin to pour out their lives in a cause greater than themselves. The little band centered on a city in the Middle East, over time becomes a worldwide phenomenon.

Defining that “something” is difficult. Even Luke struggles to tell the story, falling back on metaphors and suggestions. The book that contains this story is called “the Acts of the Apostles,” and that is what it is. It is the story of those frightened followers who became so much more than they imagined. But it could just as easily have been titled “The Acts of the Spirit,” because that is the power that brings about this change.

When the Spirit moves, amazing things happen. But they happen through the people who allow that Spirit to motivate them, to guide and direct them, to empower them for the work of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This isn’t a small thing, not just a personal, in-house thing. This is a transforming the world thing. And all would agree that this needs transformation.

This series is about what can happen when a people submit to the Spirit. It is a journey through the lectionary texts that will help us see and understand how to be a Spirit-filled people of God. We are equipped to be communities of faith who are ready to go when the Spirit moves.

Pentecost – Spirit Poured Out

May 23, 2021 – [Acts 2:1-21](#)

Color: Red

INTRODUCTION

What are you looking for this Pentecost Sunday? I know, not much really. Another Sunday, hymns and prayers, people in the pews, maybe an attempt to bring a smile or to boost people's spirits. It's another opportunity to give people a little bit of encouragement to face whatever is in store for them in the week to come.

It's a nice place to be. A good place to be. And if people must miss, no big deal; they can catch it the next time around. It's like a soap opera; you stop watching for a while and then come back only to find the characters in about the same place they were when you left. Not much has happened, same issues, same stories. Just a warm feeling that you did a good thing before getting back to the really important things in your day or your life.

Maybe I've undersold it a touch. But our expectations are understandably low. I say "understandably" because we never really see much happen in our worship experiences week by week. And so, we have learned to come with everything on our minds but the possibility that we just might encounter God one Sunday morning. We've come to fix a problem, or to tweak a lifestyle, or to get a pat on the back or a push in the backside to keep us moving on the right track. And any and all of those things just might happen and are good outcomes for our investment of an hour of our time. But they seem so much less than what might be.

This is a story of worship gone awry, at least from a human perspective. This is a story of the Spirit poured out—like water from a pitcher or from a hose. Yeah, from a hose, with a thumb pressed against the opening so it shoots across the yard and soaks the giggling, screeching children who are running with glee from the icy spray but basking in the relief from the scorching heat of the day. This is worship that refreshes, that transforms, that makes new.

So, how do you capture that moment, that doused-with-a-hose moment, that shock of cold that causes you to catch your breath at the wonder and the glory of it? That's what we are after on Pentecost Sunday—a shock, a blast of Spirit that thaws the bones and loosens the tongue. How will you pour out that Spirit

online? How will you get through the mask and into the lungs of the worshipers still physically distant from one another today? Maybe it is images of children laughing and running through a sprinkler. Remember, even Luke struggled for metaphors to describe this event. We don't have to stick to the fire and the wind. We can move to the water and the waves. We can capture the kites flying in the air, the birds soaring on the wing. You've seen those videos of a murmuration of starlings flying together, shapes of feathered bodies flying in formations that shift and change in the air. As the Spirit is poured out, the body of Christ moves and shifts and brings an amazing beauty to the world around us. Pentecost is an invitation to take flight, to cast off the bounds of earth and to soar on the winds of hope and promise, to bring together a broken world, to connect with others who seek to fly into a kin-dom way of living.

Pentecost worship is about joy, and the invitation is to let the Spirit be poured out on you. But remember, that "you" is plural. Let the Spirit be poured out on all y'all. It was because they were gathered together that this happened. So, what if we can't be gathered? What if we have to keep our distance? The Spirit can still be corporate. The technology is difficult, to be sure. But every time someone speaks for the church, remind people that all are included. Remind people that all are invited. This gift, the Spirit poured out, is for the whole body, not just for a few.

Find ways to let the people tell their many and various stories. Find ways to speak a variety of names, to describe a variety of settings, to relate a variety of experiences. Then we can find resonance, your story with my story, your experience of the Spirit with mine. Find ways to connect, even when apart. Pentecost is a unifying time, regardless of the environment in which we live. Let the stories of the body be told. Tell what happened when the Spirit was poured out.

PREACHING NOTES

You can't help but notice that Luke struggles to describe this event. He uses words that come close but aren't quite it. "A sound *like*," he writes, "tongues *as of* fire." It was sort of like wind, but not quite; it was kind of like fire, but that wasn't it either. It is an event that goes beyond description, beyond experience almost.

But the something that happens has an effect. It leaks out into the street beyond. And passersby are caught up by the sound that they hear. Voices and words—what they hear is wrapped in the language of home. That is what makes them stop. I imagine in a cosmopolitan city like Jerusalem it is difficult to keep the noise down at the best of times. So, overhearing would be a common experience. But this experience was different. People were drawn by the familiar language that they heard. It made their hearts stop for a moment as they tuned their ears more carefully to the words.

There is a story of an American tourist in Germany. The tourist had no knowledge of German whatsoever and had wandered off the tourist trail and found himself in a small village where he was having trouble making himself understood. He was about to panic when he was caught in a sneezing fit. A passerby smiled and nodded at him and said, “Gesundheit!” The American rushed after the man and declared, “O good, you speak English!”

We all long for a familiar sound, for the language of home. We long for a connection. That was what was heard on that Pentecost morning. That was what the languages offered the passersby. So, they stopped and listened. Some wondered and, I suspect, hoped. Others scoffed, being of a cynical bent. “They must be drunk!” they shouted. If there is an alcoholic beverage that allows you to speak in foreign languages, I’m going to get some.

You would have thought that Peter’s defense might have been, “Drinking teaches you languages? Intelligible languages, that is? Nonsense. You’re the ones talking crazy!” But that wasn’t his defense. Instead, he went with the “it’s only 9 a.m.” defense. It’s too early to be drunk! Or as Bishop Will Willimon said in a sermon about the Pentecost event - “Peter said, we’re not drunk . . . yet.”

The tongues that were not quite like fire and not really like tongues either, but some visible manifestation of an invisible presence, were making connections. It was one, divided and settling on each, says Luke in his struggling for words. It was one presence, one sound, and it was heard by each, who then echoed the sound so that more heard. It wasn’t an experience to keep to one’s self, that much is plain. It was meant to be shared. It was meant to be community building.

So, whether it was a birthday, the beginning of the church, as some argue; or a broadening, the opening of the doors of the church to include all, either way it

was a building of community. It was making connections. It was building up the body. Pentecost is about the church being the church. Pentecost reminds us that this is a small world, and wherever we go we are likely to find members of our family gathered around the living Word and the winds of the Spirit; a Spirit that is poured out. And this family is as diverse as the crowd that gathered around the sound that poured down from the room where the disciples were gathered. The words were heard by those from the Middle East and from Africa and from the edges of the known world. This is the family; this is the body upon which the Spirit is poured out—not just those who look like us, not just those who speak our language, but a multicolored, multilingual worldwide body of Christ ready to hear and to receive.

Peter's example shows us that once the Spirit is poured out on you, you can't be quiet. You can't stay still. You've got to move and share and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Trinity Sunday – Born of the Spirit

May 30, 2021 – [John 3:1-17](#)

Color: White

INTRODUCTION

This is the first Sunday after the Pentecost. It is the beginning of a long season that takes us all the way through the rest of the liturgical year until we reach Advent once again. So, it is a journey of some length. It is also the church's story. The first half of the year, from Advent until Pentecost is Jesus' story. From Pentecost, then, the story shifts to us—to all the followers really, to how we seek to live out that call to discipleship, to how we fulfill the commission that Jesus gave us as he ascended. And yet, we begin that journey not with a reflection on our humanness but on the unique nature of God as we have come to experience that presence. We begin our story by turning to our Creator first.

This isn't an accident, as you might surmise. In part at least, this is a reminder that we are who we are because of who God is. Our identity is in God. Our story is wrapped up in "The Story" or in "God's Story."

Our worship should be full of images of God, descriptions of how God has come to be known by God's people. We can't really have a lesson in trinitarian theology in

this hour. But we can sing of God as Father and as Mother, as Creator and as Lover. We can pray to Jesus the redeemer, our brother and our example, master and teacher. We can dance with the Spirit, our guide and our strength, the power of love within and between us all.

The worship team should pay careful attention this week to how we talk about God. If all our images, all our pronouns, all our descriptions are the same and singular, then we are reducing the immensity of God into an easily understandable powerlessness. We don't abandon traditional descriptions of God, but we balance them with more diverse ways of talking about this God we worship. We don't subtract; we add. We enhance our understandings; we stretch our imaginations; we reach beyond the easy comfort and dare to approach the frightening majesty and wonder of God. Trinity Sunday is about grabbing hold of as much God as we can stand and then knowing that we have only a tiny piece.

This Sunday could be a time of wonder and awe. Let us pray to the God who astounds us, who surprises us, who can't be nailed down. We tried that, remember, it didn't work out so well. So, let's find ways of opening up the worshipers to something bigger, something that inspires and transforms, something that unsettles a little bit too. The God we worship doesn't want to leave us as we are, but to continually transform us. That is never an easy and often an uncomfortable process. But let's prepare ourselves to tell the church's story by reminding us that there is a God who guides us, who calls us, who claims us, and who loves us. Let's be reminded that we are made new in the Spirit, continually renewed in the Spirit, as we seek to make disciples of ourselves and the world.

PREACHING NOTES

It is not the task of the preacher on Trinity Sunday to explain the Trinity. Resist the urge to find the perfect metaphor to explain God in a way that satisfies everyone listening. It won't work. Maybe the children's sermon can bring out the three-leafed clove, or the water in three states. But all our metaphors reduce the immensity of God into something comprehensible and therefore something less than the true nature of God.

Maybe what would be better on this Trinity Sunday would be to come with questions, to come seeking to know, to experience God in all God's fullness. To come and share stories, encounters, glimpses of God, all the while pointing to a larger truth beyond our images and stories. What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? How does that affect my life day to day? How does this fit into our discipleship path? What is it like? Bring your honest questions and lay them before the throne of God.

Did Nicodemus come with a question? Or did he come to score points? "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," he bombasts right in Jesus' face. We know who you are. We've got you pegged. We've caught you, tagged you, and are releasing you back into the wild, so that we can track your movements through our community. And then we will determine whether you are an invasive species come to wreak havoc on our ecosphere!

Am I being hard on Nicodemus? Maybe. Maybe it was more open than that, more innocent than that? Maybe. But maybe not. Jesus lights into him right away. John writes after that carefully worded political salutation that "Jesus answered him." Answered him? Where was the question? Maybe John should have said, "Jesus responded to him" or "Jesus debated with him." Or Jesus stripped to his wrestling singlet and leapt onto the mat for three falls out of four with yet another pharisaical opponent. Yeah, that might have set the tone nicely.

It seems like Jesus is trying to pick a fight. And Nicodemus is outclassed. He doesn't seem to know he's in a stranglehold, and that escalates when he does finally squeak out his questions: "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" and "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" And worst of all was, "How can these things be?" That really sets Jesus off; he gets personal in his response.

Why is Jesus so upset? I mean, he throws Nicodemus a wicked curve and is upset when Nick whiffs on the first pitch. Maybe he's upset at having his evening disturbed. Nicodemus was the first-century equivalent of a telemarketer who interrupts dinner to sell siding for the house you don't own. Or maybe Nicodemus caught him on a bad day. In the last chapter, Jesus attended a wedding and was called out by his mom, then went into the temple and ruined everyone else's day in one angry gesture, which left folks muttering about him as he strode through

the wreckage back home. And he finds Nicodemus huddling on the doorstep, like a homeless man at his gate. Or maybe Nicodemus forgot he was in the Gospel of John and missed the whole dark versus light symbolism. Dark, for John, is the absence of the knowledge of and presence of God. And then Nicodemus proceeds to miss everything else that Jesus tries to tell him because his mind is as dark as the night.

Perhaps he misses it because he starts with this “we know” stuff. That’s what sets Jesus off. Nicodemus comes not to learn but to show his knowledge. Nicodemus probably was expecting gratitude or something like that from Jesus. “Wow, gosh thanks, guys. Gee, you really think so much of little old me?” But no, instead he gets some head-spinning theology about the Holy Spirit, of all things. And to make it worse, how did they know that Jesus was a teacher come from God?

Nicodemus says we know this because Jesus does cool stuff. Jesus does magic tricks, signs, and wonders. There is nothing that ticks Jesus off as fast as getting all excited about the special effects and losing the narrative of the film. He didn’t want heads turned by miracles; he wanted people to come to him. He wanted people to hear his words and know his love. He wanted people to have a relationship with him and not just come for the show.

That’s how he gets to **The Verse**: 3:16. There are people who wear T-Shirts with those numbers on it who may not even know what the verse means. That might also make Jesus mad. It might make him as mad as he was at a pharisee who thought he knew all there was to know about Jesus because he had seen an unexplainable event or two. It might make Jesus as mad as he was at a temple full of buyers and sellers, making money of the need to worship that is deep down in every soul. Mad, or sad. A little of both, I suspect. *God so loved, he says, so loved the world, that whoever believes . . .* The word, or concept, *believe* in the Gospel of John is more than a head thing. Nicodemus had a head thing. But he didn’t have a heart thing. Or a soul thing. He wasn’t leaning into Jesus the way Jesus wants us to lean into him. He wasn’t hungry for Jesus the way Jesus wants us to be hungry. I am the bread, I am the gate, I am the way, the truth and the life. He wants to be all for all—our light in the darkness, our hope in the midst of the world’s despair. He doesn’t want to be a side show, or a sometime friend. He wants to be the center of our lives and hopes and dreams.

How can these things be? That would be Nicodemus's reply, I'm sure. Because it is often ours. How can these things be? How can we hold on to Jesus when the path gets slippery and the light grows dim? We must be born again. Great. Cliches. Religious nonsense cliches. Has there been a phrase more divisive in the body of Christ than that one? Maybe. But this one has been misused and misunderstood since Nicodemus stumbled over it one night. Born again? *Anothen* is the Greek word. *Anothen*. It means again and anew and from above. All wrapped up there together. But not again as in repetition - same thing over again; that's what Nicodemus missed. But neither is "born again" a badge of honor or an entrance certificate. That's what many modern-day users miss. Rather, it is an invitation to join in the dance with Jesus—whoever believes; whoever takes him by the hand and says, "Lead me"; whoever says, "I find myself in you"; whoever leans for repose as the old hymn says (***How Firm a Foundation***, for those who wonder), shall have life, abundant, eternal life.

How can these things be? They just are. Start leaning. And learning. Lest, on this Trinity Sunday, I leave you with the impression that questions are somehow bad, forgive me. But no. Questions, dumb ones and smart ones, irritating ones and time-wasting ones, earnest ones and honest ones, are good. We need to ask to learn. But then lean as we learn. Trust as we seek. Believe as we wonder. How can these things be? Believe. And ask. And live. To be born of the Spirit is to ask your questions and seek God in truth.

Second Sunday after Pentecost – Being Renewed

June 6, 2021 – [Mark 3:20-35](#) & [2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

"O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above, where Jesus knelt to share with thee the silence of eternity interpreted by love."

("Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, "John Greenleaf, Whittier, *United Methodist Hymnal* 358, v.3.)

Where do you go for sabbath rest? For time with God, alone or in community? Where is the place? When is the time? How do you plan for a time when you surrender fully to the presence of God and set aside everything else?

How can we create a restful worship experience for those who worship with us this week? How can we help people be renewed? Paul speaks of being raised with Christ. How can we give people a sense of that Resurrection as we gather or worship together online? The next verse of the hymn says, “drop thy still dews of quietness until all our strivings cease.” Can we get there? Do we need some space for quiet in worship this week? How do we give folks a sense of directed silence so that they can rest in the arms of God?

Others, however, might be renewed with singing or with energy. Perhaps include some movement built into the worship experience—dance or simple ways of moving together as though you are one body. What will give your congregation a sense of renewal?

Of course, the other theme from our texts this week is that renewal isn’t always easy to come by. Jesus went home and found a disturbing environment. Sometimes the place we think will renew us does the opposite and becomes draining. Those we thought were on our side turn out to be against us. It happens in families and in communities both. How do we reinterpret the beloved community of faith? What does it mean to be one family in God?

Worship is, of course, about God and not about us. And yet there is a dimension where when we come to completely focus on God, and God in Christ, then we are renewed in the Spirit to continue our discipleship path. So, while we don’t measure worship by how it makes us feel, there is a correlation between being built up and the worship experience where we encounter God. Sometimes, yes, that means being repentant, being reminded of our flaws and failings. We’re not after just warm fuzzies when we gather for worship. A part of renewal is the ability to take an honest look at ourselves and see who we are in God’s eyes and not just by our own standard or the standard of this world. To experience Resurrection, we must be ready to die, die to self, die to this world. We must be willing to surrender even that which is most precious to us. “Who is my mother?”

This may be more than one hour can hold. Yet there can be space for reflection and reorientation and rethinking with the goal to find our ways to renewal.

“Sabbath” is a reorientation time. We recalibrate our hearts, so that they beat in time with God’s. Worship is where we build up the body.

PREACHING NOTES

Jesus went home. He named his inner circle of disciples, and he went home. He called it a day. Well, he healed a man on the Sabbath, it turns out, and got into a mess of trouble; and then he called the inner circle and went home. The last time he was home, someone tore a hole in his roof and lowered a paralyzed man into the living room. Then he called a friend, had a party - got called out for that one too, went on a hike with his new friends, and they plucked some grain from a field they were wandering through, and got in trouble for that (reaping on the Sabbath - not stealing grain, oddly enough); then he healed a man and called his inner circle and went home. Before that, he got baptized and spent some time alone in the wilderness, cast out some demons, some of whom seemed to recognize him, but he told them to keep quiet about it; and he healed and walked and found need everywhere he went. He tried to go home and lost his roof; he attended a few parties and did the grain thing, the Sabbath thing, called his inner circle and went home.

That’s where we start this week. He went home – except it wasn’t home. Other translations don’t say home. One says he entered a house or the place he was staying. In other gospels, the text says he doesn’t have a home. But maybe that’s after he tried to go. Maybe that is the result of finding that homes aren’t the haven you hoped they would be.

For those of us who move frequently, home is an elusive concept. People often ask for a hometown. There are lots of markers I can name: place of birth, where I graduated from high school, where we got married, where the kids came, but home? That’s harder. Home is a now thing, though. Jesus went home. And his family tried to restrain him, and his neighbors tried to call him out. Welcome home, Jesus.

He went home and found a family who thought he was crazy. He was used to dealing with those who thought he was crazy. Par for the course these days. Mark follows one of his standard literary habits and makes a sandwich story. He starts one story and then interrupts it for another story and then comes back to the

story he started. The family comes in with a straitjacket and prescription drugs to see if they can save him from himself. But before they get there, a battalion of scribes comes marching down the hill from Jerusalem, and the scribes set up siege against the house where Jesus is, pointing fingers and calling names. They brought out the heavy artillery for this one. He's not just crazy, they shout at passersby; he's possessed— and not by some low-level demonic presence; he's got the top dog, the prince of demons - Beelzebul! Whoever that is. A prince, they say. There are a lot of demonic names that have power. They get all mixed up in history. One of those names is "Baalzebul" which translates as Baal (or Lord) of the Flies. Creepy. Literary, but creepy.

Anyway, the fighting scribes of Jerusalem are pretty convinced they got him this time. All these things he can do . . . See, that's the crux of the problem here. Jesus' reputation is growing – the healing, the teaching. People keep commenting on his authority and the crowds are flocking to his side to hear his words, to reach for his touch, to let his shadow pass over them. The scribes are seeing their Q-Rating dwindle, and they don't like it. So, they come and set up a press conference outside the house where Jesus is and say, "Sure, he can do all this stuff, fancy stuff, unexplainable stuff, but it is because he is using black magic! He is consorting with demons!"

Notice, they don't approach Jesus. That doesn't work so well for them. So, they are trying to attack his reputation instead. If they can just get enough of the goggle-eyed crowd to stop and think for a moment, they can chip away at his status.

But Mark says that he confronted them. He wouldn't let them shout from the sidelines; he called them in and then "parabled" them. Is that a word? No, it isn't, but it fits. He spoke to them in parables. Now, we think that means he told them stories. A parable is a story, right? Well, that's how we usually think of them, but not really. The word parable means "to throw alongside." Sometimes a story is thrown alongside a question, and we puzzle out an answer, as in, "Who is my neighbor?" "A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among robbers." But sometimes it isn't a story; it's an idea or an image. In this case, it is an argument, a logical discussion that gets thrown alongside the accusations.

“He is working with Satan!” Think about it, Jesus says, does that make sense? I’m dismantling Satan’s kingdom, threatening Satan’s power. You think I’m working for his team? I’ve tied him up and am plundering what used to be thought of as his house! I’m claiming the treasure he has stolen back, the treasure which is you. All of you. You who really belong to God. You are a part of God’s family.

Family. Then someone remembers that he was supposed to tell Jesus about the family that has come for him. “Hey Jesus, your mom is here. Your brothers and sisters are here. They want you. You’ve broken curfew. You’ve soiled the family name. You need to get home and have some sense knocked back into you,” they say.

Jesus smiled and said, “Family. My family is here already.” It sounds mean to our ears. It is as if he was divorcing the group he grew up with, the mother who gave him birth. You don’t count, we hear; you aren’t important. And I don’t want to blunt the words too much; there is a hard edge to what he is saying here. But it is not so much a dismissal of his family as it is a statement of inclusion. The family, those to whom we owe allegiance and honor and welcome and love, above all love, is not a small circle but an almost unimaginably large one. Any who loves God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. That’s the family.

That’s home. We don’t leave home to come to church. We leave home in one sense to go home in another sense. And wherever we gather with those who love God, we are at home. So we should greet one another not with “I’m glad you came,” but with, “Welcome home.”

They called him out at home – his family, those afraid for him, perhaps even afraid *of* him. They called him out. But he knew, because he understands home and family better than we do; he knew he was safe. Safe at home.

Welcome home. Paul talks about renewal, about the outer nature wasting away while the inner nature is being renewed. This is the same sort of refocusing that Jesus was demonstrating when he went home. Turning the outer to the inner, turning from what is visible to something hidden and yet so much more profound.

We think home is a place of renewal. We think we can go home and rest. And we can, but only if our focus is right. Home won’t renew us, won’t build us up, unless the focus of our home is on the One who raises us into a new kin-dom, a new

reality. Unless it is our true home, “not made with hands but eternal in the heavens.” That is the place of renewal, of strengthening. And it is available now as it will be in eternity. It is our peace, our grace now and a grace to be shared. A home to be built, here and now with all the people of God.

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Growing into the New Creation

June 13, 2021 – [Mark 4:26-34](#) & [2 Corinthians 5:6-10, \(11-13\), 14-17](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Jesus told stories. And some of them weren’t even stories, but metaphors, or images. They were hints of stories, glimpses of something just out of reach. Some find these stories or images confusing. “Why doesn’t he just tell us plain?” Well, some things are too complex to be plain. Sometimes you have to share the bigger picture in order to see.

Worship this week is about growing into the new creation that we are called to be in Christ. So, think about talking about growing. Those who are raising kids find themselves telling stories about the latest thing, the latest mischief, the latest accomplishment that their child has gotten into. We need stories to help us see what living as a disciple is like. We tell our stories, and we tell stories of others as examples of a faithful life.

So make room for storytelling this week. We used to call it testimony. We tell our stories of faith. Yes, of course, this could get out of hand. Sometimes we like to hear ourselves talk. Or sometimes we don’t want to tell the deep dark secrets of our souls. Maybe some instructions on how to tell your testimony would be useful. Maybe some examples of those within the congregation who have a story to tell could be encouraged and given space to do so. What is it like to be made a new creation? What is it like to experience God’s love and forgiveness, to have a taste of the kin-dom in your own life? What glimpses of the kin-dom have you seen in your daily life and what ways have you been or experienced the sheltering shade of the branches of faith?

This is another week for giving thanks for the body, for the fellowship of faith that provides an example of living discipleship around us and before us. But also, a

teaching tool to help others put their own story into words in a way that allows them to share. We all have growing to do, that's true. Yet our example might just be the metaphor others need to help them understand and grow into faith too. Worship can also model how we tell our story in ways that are not intrusive or offensive to others, but an outgrowth of loving relationships of caring and service. Encourage the telling of stories. Our own stories of growth into the new creation might be the means of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

PREACHING NOTES

"With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it," Mk. 4:33.

There was a rabbinic teaching method called "*charaz*." It means stringing pearls, and the teacher would spin out image after image, wisdom saying after wisdom saying, parable after parable in a seemingly random way. It was designed to tell a larger truth by focusing on small details or to tell about a whole by examining the parts. It was describing a picture by telling a variety of perspectives.

I am sure that the hearers got as frustrated by this style of teaching as we do. "Which is it, Jesus" was asked. Is the kin-dom like a pearl or a net? Is it more like yeast or like a treasure in a field? Do we stumble across it or set out with a checklist to find it? Does it work in secret hidden away from our eyes like yeast in the dough, or does it sprout up like a plant and provide shade and protections like a mustard shrub? Is it something common like a seed or questionable like yeast or valuable like a treasure?

All these questions and more Jesus would answer with a smile and nod of the head and tell us that we are like scribes bringing out of the treasure something old and something new. And with furrowed brows we would throw up our hands and grumble. When we pressed him and shouted out, "Which is it? This or that?" He would say, "yes." You know he would. With a laugh, he would say, "yes. That's it exactly!" And he wouldn't be saying it just to be funny. He'd say it because it was the truth. He'd say it because it was the best answer. Is it a pearl or a net or a seed or a treasure hidden in a field or yeast hidden in three measures of flour? Yes, it is that exactly!!

Talking to Jesus can be exhausting. You think he is out to confuse you. We keep skipping over those verses where it says he said nothing except in parables. I think we skip them because they make it sound as if Jesus was just messing with us, and we don't like that. But the truth is, he really wants us to see. He really wants us to understand. We just can't do it by thinking the way we usually think.

We have to learn to look under our noses and off to the horizon at the same time. We have to learn to see the ordinary and the spectacular all together. We have to learn to experience the everyday and the once in a lifetime in the same moment. We need to see deeper and trust more completely. We need to value what the world throws away and throw away what the world thinks most valuable.

In short, the kin-dom asks us to turn upside down, to stretch and reach and get outside of ourselves long enough to really see the wonder of the universe in a tiny seed. But most important—at least it seems to me to be most important—we are supposed to do it with joy. That's what it means to grow into the new creation. We are to see it in all its multifaceted beauty, in all its diverse wonder. Just when we think we've got it nailed down, it slips away and appears in another guise, another face. And we are surprised and blessed and overwhelmed with the amazing grace of God that would bless us so.

Because we are given the chance to be remade too – just like the kin-dom. That's what Paul is describing in 2 Corinthians in our text this week. We are now the parable; we are the mustard seed that grows into that which gives shade, gives welcome and relief, gives justice and comfort to so many kinds of birds that we can amaze even ourselves.

This confidence that Paul speaks of isn't confidence in ourselves. It isn't in the right choices that we might finally make. It isn't in the growth that we see within us and around us. This confidence isn't in our own salvation, but in the one who saves us as we are being saved. Paul wants us to live out loud, to let the world know that we are a new creation. That's what it means to be a living parable of the kin-dom.

He reminds us about standing before the judgment seat in the same passage where he tells us to be confident. That doesn't seem to fit all that well. Thinking about the former wouldn't necessarily lead to the latter. Unless, as we've pointed out, the confidence isn't in us but in Christ. Because then the image becomes that

we stand before the one who worked in us and through us who will then recognize that presence in all our actions, imperfectly to be sure, but present, nonetheless. That's the new creation Paul talks about, that indwelling of the presence of Christ. "If anyone is in Christ" Paul writes. He could have said, if Christ is in anyone. It's about as fuzzy as trying to decide if the kin-dom is like a seed or a tree, a pearl or yeast. About as fuzzy and about as exciting. *If anyone* means *people just like us*. And it means people who aren't like us on the outside. It means anyone who carries a seed's worth of faith in the Christ who claims them.

The joy is that we can grow. As a new creation, as a tiny seed, we can grow. There is more; there is always more for us to realize, more for us to live into—not as a burden, not as a duty, but as the joy of discovering more Christ. We are making disciples, not have made, not done with that disciple-thing, but we are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And we are making them out of ourselves and our neighbors and the world that God loved so much. Step by step, branch by branch, we grow into the new creation.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Enduring the Storms

June 20, 2021 – [Mark 4:35-41](#) & [2 Corinthians 6:1-13](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Green is the dominant color of this long after Pentecost season. It is the color of life and of growth. Here is where the focus switches from the story of Jesus to the story of the church. Not that we leave Jesus behind, of course, but Jesus is now working through the body of Christ, the church, to continue his ministry and invitation in the world. This is our story, who and what we are called to be. This is the story of disciple making day to day; this is our reason for being.

It is also a story of the real world. This task we are given is glorious, and it is a source of joy to the very core of our beings, but it isn't easy. It isn't easy because we live in a messy world and we are messy people. And stuff happens. That's the background of our texts for today. Stuff happens – difficult stuff, tragic stuff, stuff that knocks us down and threatens to overwhelm us. This might be natural stuff, like the storms in our Gospel text that seem to come from nowhere and are indiscriminate in destruction. Or it could be human stuff – the way we mistreat,

abuse, oppress one another simply because we can, like the abuse Paul suffered that he recounts in 2 Corinthians 6. Stuff happens.

This worship experience is on the first level an acknowledgement of the messy world in which we live. People are struggling; people are hurting; our brothers and sisters of color are dealing with systemic racism and the economic effects of white privilege. The pandemic still has our economy reeling and many unemployed and underemployed, not to mention the long-term health effects on those who were stricken by the virus and the grief over the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives. The lasting impact of the assault on our democracy will ripple for decades as we seek to find ways to live up to the ideals we hold as a nation. Stuff happens. The storm rises and we are in danger of being swept away.

And yet. What an amazing phrase: “and yet.” Facing the reality of the world in which we live is not a recipe for despair. It is instead an acknowledgement of the power of the God we worship. We call upon God to still the storms that surround us, even as we pray for the strength to endure. And not just endure but to help create a shelter for those who are ravaged by the storms that blow unabated.

On the first level our proclamation is that we are not alone. The community is the sign of that presence, the acknowledgement that we face what we face in solidarity. We swim against the tide of individualism to recognize our need for one another. We offer to come alongside those who are suffering, even as we are suffering. This is a celebration of community, of relationship. At Discipleship Ministries, we claim that disciple making begins with relationship. We grow best when we grow together. Let this worship moment be one of gratitude for those who have been instrumental for us in our time of struggle.

Offer up prayers for mentors and supporters of our faith. Give thanks to the teachers and the examples of how to live life as a disciple of Jesus in daily life. Set up a prayer station where we can light a candle or post a note with names or moments when we have been blessed by the presence of another person of faith.

In addition to the power of presence, this worship experience could remind us of the longer-term view that we are called to take. We see beyond this present storm to the hope on the horizon. It may seem a long way off, and this won't diminish the destructive effect of the mess we might be in at the moment. But it could possibly give us the strength to keep fighting, to keep moving forward. It

can help us hold on to hope when there doesn't seem to be much cause to do so. We lean into the promises of the kin-dom, partly because we believe the word that has been given and partly because we have seen glimpses of that hope at work.

Where are the signs of grace at work in our world? Yes, we are aware of the storms that rage, but we are also keeping our eyes open for the shafts of light that come piercing through. What celebrations can we find in the midst of the body? What answers to prayer and results of hard work can we lift up?

While our prayers continue for the end to the storms that rage, our efforts and our emphasis focus us on the strength and the courage to endure the storm.

PREACHING NOTES

"On that day." What an inauspicious beginning. Just a day, a day of teaching and healing, a day like many other days in the life of those who said yes to Jesus. But this was a particularly exhausting day. A tiring day. Jesus wanted to get away. No elaborate farewells, no ritual good-byes. He turns to his disciples and says, "Let's blow this pop-stand!" And off they go. They get in a boat and they set off across the sea. Or rather the lake; it's not that big really; it's not like an ocean crossing. But the geography surrounding this lake makes it susceptible to pop-up storms. Out of nowhere with nothing on the horizon, then—bam—there it is. You're in the midst of the storm.

That's the nature of storms; they just happen. Sometimes we can look back and see them coming; but most of the time, they just come. It is almost as if someone, something was out to get us. There is a feeling about the storm in this story, that it isn't just a storm, a natural occurrence, a common happenstance. There is something bigger here, something malevolent. When Jesus tells the storm to calm down, he shouts "Peace! Be Still." These are the same words Mark tells us Jesus used to cast out demons. There, it is translated as "Be quiet! Come out of her!" Same words. This storm, Mark implies, is demonic, evil, needing the hand of a savior.

We've been visited by evil in our world. You name it in your place or see it in the wider world, our nation, at the heart of things. The storm of evil is all too evident. That evil exists is beyond debate. It's not always easy to name it, to identify it in a messy world, a world broken by sin and fear. But sometimes it is the responsibility

of those who claim the name of Christ to identify evil, whether it be in a culture and country so foreign to us as to be almost incomprehensible, or one that is all too familiar and even claiming to be the true face of patriotism. Like Christ, we sometimes need to stand in the face of the demonic and tell it to be quiet and get out.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The story isn't really about the storm. The storm demands our attention. It seems to be the major character, the biggest threat, the loudest voice. But this isn't a story about storms. It's a story about Jesus. And it's a story about faith. It's easy to miss. We are distracted when we are afraid; we lose hope. And often one of the first things to go is faith, belief in a loving God, and hope in tomorrow and today.

That's why Jesus jumps down the throats of the disciples. They let go. "Have you still no faith?" Still? Just the paragraph before this passage, Mark tells us that Jesus always spoke in parables, in riddles and stories. People often wandered off confused, uncertain. It was almost as if Jesus didn't want to spoon feed people; he wanted them to meet him halfway. Take a risk and say I believe, even when I don't fully understand. I believe, even as I doubt. Jesus was OK with doubts. Doubters get a pass from Jesus. But those who were afraid got a reprimand. Anyway, the paragraph before the storm starts says that Jesus always spoke in parables, except when he spoke to the disciples. To them he explained everything. Everything? Everything. He told them who he was. He told them what he was about. He told them what it meant. Everything. Have you still no faith? What else can I do, says Jesus? What else can I give you? What other cheat sheets; what other Cliff's Notes? For heaven's sake!

At the end of the story, they are in awe. "Who is this?" they said. Even the winds and waves obey him! Who is this? They'd never seen anything like this before. Jesus had never stilled a storm before. He had never stopped a wind gust, never smoothed out a wave. It's no wonder that it never occurred to them to ask Jesus to do such a thing. They had no idea that this was in his toolbox. And frankly, if they had gently awakened Jesus and said, "Um, it's pretty wild out here, anything you can do?" he probably would have smiled and then given them that "watch this" look and brought them to safety.

The problem is, they don't ask him to do anything. Did you notice that? They don't say, in Mark's version of the story anyway, "We need help here." No, what they say is infinitely more offensive to Jesus. It is evidence that they have been dozing through disciple class, their minds wandering as Jesus patiently walked them through his history and his mission. Worse than that, they missed the class motto, the mission statement, the center of everything. They forgot the most famous verse in all of the Gospels: "For God so loved the world" . . . *so loved*. "Don't you care?" They shouted that in their fear. They lost their grip on the main truth about Christ. "Don't you care?" You might as well shout at the birds in the air, "Don't you fly?" Or shout at the raindrops, "Don't you fall?" Or shake their fists at the sun and ask, "Don't you shine?" *Don't you care?* Of course, he cares. That's why he's there sleeping on a cushion because he is exhausted from caring for everyone everywhere. Of course, he cares.

But in their panic, in their fear, they forgot. They lost their grip on him and thought only of their own lives. Their boat was already swamped, and they gave up. On life, on hope, on him. They gave up. Have you still no faith? It's easy to forget in the midst of the storm. Forget to hold on to him. Not because he will still every storm, but he will stand with you in the swamped boat, in the crashing waves. He cares, and that is everything in the midst of the storm.

Paul also is disappointed. Well, maybe not. But he talks to them like children, he says. They aren't leaning into the wind, he says; they aren't risking loving like they should, like they could. He doesn't want to wait, doesn't want them to wait. Now is the time, he says, right now. Yes, the winds are blowing; yes, so much is uncertain; yes, there are threats aplenty. But now is the time to claim faith.

Then, as if to make it even harder to claim faith, he tells them his own story. He tells them what he has endured, hinting, as he does, that their lives aren't going to get any easier. In fact, he hints that it is possible that making this choice might bring a whole lot of trouble falling down on their heads. And yet, it is worth the choice. It is worth the storms that come. Paul would argue that it is the only way to survive the storms that come – by claiming this relationship, by claiming this family.

Remember the "you" to whom he speaks in the opening verse and throughout this text is plural. We choose together, or rather we as individuals choose to be a

part of something bigger than ourselves. We become part of a family. We become part of a community when we choose this day, which means that we have support, that we have resources when we face the storms that come. And we offer resources when someone else is struggling to find their feet in the winds that blow. That's how we survive the storm: together.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Giving What You Have

June 27, 2021 – [Mark 5:21-43](#) & [2 Corinthians 8:7-15](#)

Color: Green

INTRODUCTION

Stewardship is not simply a once-a-year item. This week's texts provide a perfect opportunity to talk about stewardship without following it up with a pledge card or a capital campaign. Though the impetus for the Corinthian text is a monetary collection, it could easily be shifted to sharing of gifts and offering of grace, stewarding what we have been given in a way that gives glory to God.

Or perhaps the worship team would prefer to focus on Mark and Jesus' example of patient grace and loving healing as he gathers up those who are calling out for Resurrection and for acceptance. Who is interrupting us with their needs and their cries? Who has been left on the margins because of things beyond control and is reaching for a way into the community? How do we make space? How do we stop our busy, headlong rush to accomplish our tasks (which might be good things in and of themselves) and find time to be touched by another's need? How do we make space in our hearts for the hurting of this world?

Our resources are not infinite, of course, whether we talk about time or about goods or about money. But we are called to give what we have, to use what we have, to make space to think of others besides ourselves. This worship moment is a call to raise our heads and look around us to see who is next to us and in need of the grace we have received.

Often, people say they want to help but they don't know how or where. They are suspicious of people on the street who ask for funds or requests for help through mail or email. This would be a good opportunity to remind the gathered congregation of how the church responds to needs. What are the policies of giving to those who come to the door of the church? Where do the funds come

from and where do they go? What community efforts does the church support, whether directly by giving goods or indirectly by funding other programs? You might think that everyone knows this stuff. The truth is, they don't. You may have mentioned it before; there may be signs all around, but tell it again – not as a burden but as an opportunity for people to participate in the grace of giving. Tell stories of those affected by the giving from the church, lives that were changed, hope restored. People are more willing to give and support a ministry if they know that it makes a difference in someone's life.

It is good to remember, however, that this isn't just about raising money. This is about realizing how much we have already received in grace from our Lord and the joy we have in living that out. It is about learning how to be present to the world around us as a way of being present to God. This service should be a celebration of all that God has poured into us and how we have been claimed from the margins, so that we can then partner with God's Spirit in doing the same for others. We can give what we have been given.

PREACHING NOTES

It is said that C.S. Lewis walked in on an academic discussion about the distinctiveness of Christianity. Those present were about to decide that there was nothing that set Christianity apart from any of the other world religions because they were unable to come up with anything that truly marked our faith and set it apart from the rest. So, they put the question to Lewis. He paused only a moment and said, "That's easy, it's grace."

Grace is what makes us who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. Grace is what motivates us to respond with love and joy and hope. Grace is what equips us for living in this world and what allows us to help create a sense of community as we seek out other recipients of God's grace. It is what we have to offer the world, nothing of our own, but the gifts that come from grace.

That is what Paul says, in a rather convoluted way, in our text from 2 Corinthians. It is Paul's stewardship campaign sermon. And like all of us, he talks around it in such a way that you just might miss what he is saying.

Paul is taking a collection for the church in Jerusalem. The growth was out in the suburbs, and the downtown church was suffering. (OK, not exactly, but sort of.)

And so he went from church to church, asking for mission giving. And the churches responded. Read the first part of chapter eight, and you'll note that Paul is proud of them for giving; some of them gave, even though they also had struggles.

And now he comes back to Corinth, a church he has struggled with, to be fair – a church with a few problems and some dissension. But he still invites the people to give. (I guess this is a precedent for the practice of taking money donated by less than perfect people!)

He invites them to participate: "Now as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking." Verse 7 sounds like the classic buttering people up before asking them for something – flattering them before sticking them with the bill.

But that isn't what he does. The last two words of verse seven are here translated as "generous undertaking." He wants them to excel, to participate, to enjoy this generous undertaking. But the Greek words are "*charis perusseō*," which probably translate better, or more directly, as "abounding grace." The invitation is not to give but to participate in grace, abounding grace. Paul goes on to explain that this is what Jesus did for us by emptying himself, giving up and giving away that we might know glory, that we might know hope and salvation. We might be able to give grace away because we have received it.

Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians that he is doing them a favor by letting them give. He knows that they, like we, want to know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he says, I know that grace; and not only can you know it; you can live it. Not only can you receive it as a gift, you can activate it by giving it away, by participating in the ripples of grace that go from person to person, community to community and bring transformation and an experience of the kingdom.

He concludes the invitation by reminding us that love needs proof from time to time; love needs action to really be love – at least the love that Christ calls us to, the love that God expresses. And the most famous verse of all reminds us: John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"

In the Gospel text from Mark, it is Jesus who is the example of grace or the example of giving what he has. Jesus seizes the moment, responds to the need, and is fully present with those who come to him, even though there is an interruption in the midst of it all.

I wonder if Jesus got exasperated at the interruptions. It seems that time and time again someone comes running up to change his course. I know he is ready to help and to heal and to go where he is most needed, but still. The demands of a crowd wanting something from him must have been like barking dogs getting on his last nerve. It must have been. But you can't tell it by reading the gospels. There seems to be an infinite supply of patience that he could draw on. OK, maybe one time he seemed a bit short with someone (that's a story for another time), but for the most part, he was grace incarnate.

Well, duh. Of course the point is, not only him, but we are as well. That's the hard part – to not see needs, people, opportunities as interruptions, but as grace moments. To give and to receive. To be attentive and to be present. To be alive and real. Like he was. He is.

There is more here, however, than the interruption. There is healing; there is acceptance; there is life out of death; there is hope. There are twelve years of a downward spiral leading to rock bottom; there are twelve years of young life that seem to be vanishing like the morning mist. There is a daughter reclaimed from shame and suffering, and there is a daughter reclaimed from death. There is wonder and there is laughter - both before and after Jesus has come into the picture. And there is a secret.

Ah, the secret. Why does Jesus tell them not to tell when they aren't going to help telling? When you undo a funeral, someone is going to ask some questions. It seems an odd thing for Jesus to do. Surely he knew that they were going to tell. Unless the commandment wasn't not to tell, but to say who got to do the telling. The only ones in the room were the little girl's parents and three disciples. Maybe he wanted the story to be hers and not theirs. Maybe Jesus was setting the precedent for witness. Tell your own story, not someone else's. And tell it with your living rather than your words, at least at first. "Give her something to eat!"

Jairus is a leader of the synagogue, Mark tells us. That gives him some status, that puts a certain aura around him. Jairus is the person others go to; he is a decider, a

determiner. He has resources; he has position; he has power. He is used, I am sure, to solving all his own problems. Except this one. "My little daughter," he says, she's twelve years old, almost an adult. Marriageable age, ready to move out and move on. But at the point of death, she becomes his little daughter again. "Lay your hands on her," he asks, bless her, ordain her, set her apart, heal her, he asks. Save her. The word that we translate here is "sozo," sometimes translated as *heal*; sometimes translated as *save* – as in, "are you saved?" "Save her," he asked, "so that she may be made well and live." Not just made well but to live also. He asked that Jesus bless her with the fullness of life and give her all that is in store for her, the potential, the goodness, the glory of God. "Let her shine," he asks. No, he begs, on his knees, face down in the dust, clinging to Jesus' ankles, begging.

That's a follower. He hadn't been a follower before, as far as we know. But he is now. Because he interrupted the interruptible Jesus, and he pleaded for help. *We can't do this alone. We need help. We need Jesus' help. Lay your hands on us, bless us, bless them, bless all we encounter. Use our hands, use our knees, use whatever it takes to save us, to make us well and alive. Then we can learn to give what we have received, grace upon grace.*