

SERMON: But Some Doubted
TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20

6-7-20

In a Zoom meeting last Thursday, I gathered with a number of other pastors from our presbytery, as we've been doing regularly since mid-March. Most of the time our discussion centers around the coronavirus pandemic, and how to lead our churches in this difficult time. But last week, our conversation turned to racism. We broke into small groups to talk about how we were doing with the brutal murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests.

Here I met a black pastor of a mostly black congregation in St. Louis. Though we had only just met - and only saw each other on screen - I sensed that he felt drained and pained. While another person in the group - a white woman - expressed her feelings of hope, that something might actually change this time because of the massive outcry around the country, the young, black pastor just shook his head. He admitted to being cynical, but he explained that this is "the same movie" that keeps getting played over and over again. Like chapter 26 of the same book that doesn't have an ending. This is nothing new for him or for the African American community. "This is normal," he said. "This is reality." Furthermore, he is doubtful that anything will change.

Frankly, that's what I'm afraid of, as well. I'm afraid that after a few weeks, our outrage will lose energy, and our cries for justice will grow quiet, our commitment to change will fade. When we realize that the work is challenging, and that change requires sacrifice, and that justice will cost us our privilege, we will hesitate and procrastinate until we slide back into the comfort of the status quo.

The great majority of the white people I know are good, compassionate, peaceful, open-minded, and open-hearted white people - in my family, among my friends, and within the all-white churches I have served and the communities I have called home. They are all heartbroken and outraged over the killing of George Floyd. Most of the white people I know, I would never think to describe as *racist*. But as long as we are comfortable with the way people of color in our society are treated, then we are participants in a racist system. If we are not doing the work of anti-racism, then we are racist. If we refuse to learn, to understand, and to acknowledge that whites are a privileged race, then I doubt that life will get any better for our black friends.

We are looking at a very brief gospel lesson for Trinity Sunday. The eleven disciples are meeting with the risen Jesus for the last time before he ascends into heaven. His parting words to them come as one final commandment, commonly known as the Great Commission. “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” There it is: the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God in three persons. That’s why the lectionary includes this passage for Trinity Sunday.

It sounds simple enough. But believe me, it’s not simple at all. Church leaders and theologians have been writing volumes and adopting statements and debating truth versus heresy for over two thousand years. But the reformed understanding is basically this. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. All are equal. And all have always existed. They have separate roles, like Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, but the three are never separated.

Human beings were made in the image of God. And every person is an example of the Trinity. Think about a newborn baby. At the moment of her birth,

she becomes someone's daughter, someone's granddaughter, maybe a sibling or a cousin or a niece or a neighbor. Just one child will relate to others in various ways.

But beyond the Trinity, there's something else in these few verses that I find interesting, as well. Matthew tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped him, **BUT SOME DOUBTED.**

At the end of his gospel, after 28 chapters, Matthew finds it necessary to tell us that some of those who were closest to Jesus, doubted. His dearest friends who spent day and night with him for 3 years, who heard all his teachings and witnessed all his actions, who prayed with him and dined with him, who saw all his miracles and were greeted by him after his resurrection - some of them doubted.

Doubted what, do you suppose? Doubted that Jesus was the Messiah? Doubted that he was the Son of God? Did they doubt that he really died and was raised? Did they doubt that he really loved them? "When they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted." Maybe they doubted that Jesus was worthy of their worship. Maybe they doubted the mission he had prepared them for, or their ability to continue it without him. Maybe they doubted that he would really be with

them always, as he promised. Maybe you're wondering which disciples worshiped Jesus, and which of them doubted.

One commentary explained that, "Most English translations of [this verse] leave the impression that the disciples included some worshipers and some doubters..., but the Greek may also be translated, perhaps more naturally, to suggest that the whole group of disciples both worship and doubt... Jesus commissions not perfect disciples, but people who both worship and doubt as they stand at the edge of the world that is passing away and the one that is coming to them... Matthew repeatedly tells stories that recount the ways Jesus, and sometimes his disciples, cross and blur the boundaries between heaven and earth. But it is only with Jesus' defeat of death that the breach between heaven and earth is mended. Jesus sends the disciples into the world not only to announce the salvation of humans, but to bear witness to the end of a broken creation. Jesus' words at the Great Commission are thus not merely the fitting end of Matthew's story of Jesus, but a vision of the end of a broken world and the beginning of new creation. (Stanley Saunders, www.workingpreacher.org June 7, 2020)

I don't know about you, but I sometimes have doubts. Even after 25 years in ministry, I have doubts that creep in and disturb my worship of God. Especially in our broken world. At times like this, when I am fearful of what climate change is doing to the planet, when there is a worldwide pandemic threatening our way of life, and when the centuries-old problem of racism seems to be rising when it should be declining. I admit that I have to stop and ask myself, "Where is God in all this? What does God have in store for us? Is this the end of the world as we know it? Or are we on the brink of a new creation?"

Doubt can be a good thing when it brings us to our knees praying to God for answers. And when we receive answers - or find evidence of God in our searching - doubt can strengthen our faith and energize our worship.

So, when we doubt that we are able to continue the mission that Jesus began, may we remember that God doesn't call the able, God enables the called. When we are feeling deflated and uncertain of God's presence, may we experience the fire and the wind of the Holy Spirit among us. And when we find ourselves praying that Jesus would return and bring a new heaven and a new earth, may we be renewed at his table, strengthened and nourished in his body and blood to go and

make disciples and work to bring about a new creation. When we doubt, may we find confidence in his promise, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

To the glory of God!

AMEN.