



Pioneer Pastoral Charge
9:30am Cereal United Church
11:15am Oyen United Church

Sunday May 8, 2022

Easter 4. Mother's Day

Adapted from Rev. Helen Reed, Diaconal Minister

We Gather As People Of God...

Prelude

Welcome & Announcements

Candle Lighting

We light the Christ Candle, aware of God around, among, & within us. In a moment of silence, we prepare ourselves to celebrate God's presence in our community.

Call to Worship*

By the power of God's Spirit
we rise and welcome this day.

We come so that our eyes
will be opened to new possibilities.

We come to experience God's
Spirit speaking in our heart.

We come to worship:

The one who makes us whole,

The one in whose name we serve

The one who gives our work meaning.

Praise be to God.

œ Gathering Hymn: ♪ # Oh A Song Must Rise

Faith Stories: Guarantee for Life

œ Hymn: ♪ VU#232 Joyful, Joyful We Adore You

Prayer for Grace:

Holy One,

You have given many gifts to the world.

You wrap those gifts in many different packages...

some in the people who surround us...

some in the places we call home...

some in the land and creatures that

we share our food, our breath, your world with.

We don't always appreciate the gifts around us.

We miss the little pieces that lift us up.

We forget to say Thank You.

We use words that are careless

We hurt instead of heal.

**We let opportunities go by that could be used
to appreciate, to support, or to love.**

Forgive us God.

Open our hearts a little bit wider.

Help us to see your love surrounding us.

Help us to be your love surrounding others.

**May we offer all that we are in appreciation for
all that you are.**

Amen.

Words of Assurance*

When we become aware of
the great love that surrounds us,
Channels of renewal and healing open
and the God of compassion
turns ordinary things into life-giving acts:
Hands extended in friendship,
Medicines new and ancient,
Healthy meals prepared and served,
Warm blankets over fevered bodies,
Prayers spoken by heart and minds.
See God around us, among us, within us.
Know that God loves us all ways and always.
Thanks be to God.

Scripture Reading

John 10:22-30 New International Version

Further Conflict Over Jesus' Claims

22 Then came the Festival of Dedication[a] at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. 24 The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all[b]; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

*Scripture is our song for the journey,
the living word passed on from generation to
generation to guide and inspire.*

***God calls us to be doers of the word
and not hearers only.***

Message/Reflections

☞Hymn: ♪ VU#595 The Servant Song

Offering Invitation

God of love and all people,
through your gift of story,
you offer many ways to grow our souls.

You ask us to make choices that are honest
You ask us to consider well
how we choose to support and care
for the people of your earth.

As we hear your story today,
may we respond with honesty and humility,
may we offer all that we have
to be powerful love in your world.
Amen.

Offertory: ♪ MV#191 What Can I Do?

Prayer of God's People for God's People:

Holy God of compassion and love and challenge.
We offer you these gifts, small and large, so that
they may be combined with your love and direction
to support your people and your world.

We weave into these gifts our prayers...
We pray and give thanks for the women of our world
who spend their life caring for family, friends and
neighbours.

We pray and give thanks for all those people who
offer us the gifts of mothering... gifts of compassion,
and love, of hugs, of food for body and soul.

We pray for a world that needs to be reminded
to see the good in life,
to see the need of others,
to remember that we are family together

We pray for those people and places who are
broken

By violence, by loneliness,
By hunger, by homelessness
By illness, by grief.

God, we ask that your love
surround all those in need.

God, we ask that you push us
to where we are to be to offer mothering to your
world as you have offered mothering to us.

Amen.

∞Blessing **

May God bless us and may we all be

- ❖ **graceful in Spirit,**
- ❖ **hopeful in word,**
- ❖ **faithful in deed**

Changing the Christ Candle:

The light of Christ, Shining into all the corners of the earth, showing us where we are and where we are meant to be.

The Spirit of God. Breathe it in...and know that God is with us wherever we go.

∞Sending Song: ♪ VU#424 May the God of Hope Go With Us

Postlude

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Acknowledgements

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It's a late December day in Jerusalem. Jesus is walking in the portico of Solomon, an old and revered part of the Temple, and as usual, he's drawing a crowd. This time, the people gathered around him have come to celebrate the Feast of the Dedication (better known to us as Hanukkah), a festival honoring the rededication of the Temple after its defilement by the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE.

The people have come with a question. Perhaps they've heard one of Jesus's enigmatic parables, or witnessed one of his miracles. Or maybe they just want to trap him into saying something they consider blasphemous. Whatever the motive, the question they pose is a zinger: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

As I consider this question from our Gospel reading this week, I have two reactions. On the one hand, it feels odd to ask for clarity so soon after Easter.

Didn't we just celebrate the plainest, clearest, most irrefutable proof of Jesus's Messiah-ship possible? How can we still be "in suspense" after the Resurrection?

On the other hand, the question, and its timing in our lectionary, feel spot-on. It tells us the truth about how faith works, if we're honest enough to admit it. Most of the time, faith isn't a clean ascent from confusion to clarity, doubt to trust. It's a perpetual turning. A circle we trace from knowing to unknowing, from unbelief to belief. From "Christ is Risen," to "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." I used to consider this sort of circling a sin or a

weakness, but I don't anymore. It's what we human beings do. It's real life. So, if you find yourself asking Jesus to "speak plainly" into the circumstances of your life on this fourth Sunday of Easter, then you're not alone. If something in you feels suspended, taut, impatient for Jesus to rise again one more time into the particulars of your comings and goings, your nights and days — then welcome to the way of authentic faith. This is how it works.

I don't know about you, but for me, the question Jesus confronts in the temple hits a nerve, and exposes all kinds of pain and yearning. These days, I do feel as if God is keeping me in suspense, and wounding me with his silence. I can't count the number of times in the past few weeks I've started a prayer with the words of the people who approached him on that long ago December day: "If you are." If you are good. If you are powerful. If you are loving. If you are real. If you are the Messiah, then stop talking in riddles. Stop hiding when I long for your presence. Stop awakening in me holy hungers you won't satisfy. Show up, speak plainly, act decisively. Take this world of swirling, dubious gray, and turn it black and white, once and for all.

How does Jesus respond? Well... not plainly. And not — at first glance, anyway — kindly. "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says with a discernible impatience in his voice. And then the icy clincher: "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

Ouch.

I'll admit it: I've spent several days now wrestling with the harshness of that sentence. "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." What can such a stark, cut-and-dry pronouncement mean?

I suppose the easy dodge would be to assume that the sentence doesn't apply to me. After all, I'm a believer. I grew up in the church. I know my Bible. I love the liturgy and I say my prayers. Surely I both believe and belong.

Except when I don't. The nagging trouble with Jesus's indictment is that it does apply to my spiritual experience. Not rarely, but often. When I ask Jesus to stop keeping me in suspense, when I insist that he speak plainly, what I'm really saying is: "I can't trust you. I trust neither your willingness to speak to me, nor my capacity to hear your voice. You're supposed to be my Good Shepherd. I'm supposed to know your voice, but I very often don't. So what now?"

At first glance, Jesus's reply might appear to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him. But in fact, what Jesus says is exactly the opposite: you struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong. In other words, belief doesn't come first. It can't come first. Belonging does. And therein lies our hope and our consolation. According to this text, whatever belief I arrive at in this life will not come from the ups and downs of my own emotional life. It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon. Rather it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus's flock — of walking in the footsteps of the

Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and listening in real time for the voice of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If I won't follow him into those layered places — places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt — I will never belong to him at all.

I wonder if Jesus resisted the crowd's question that day because it was so pitifully inadequate. What good would it have done if he'd stood up in the temple at their insistence and yelled, "Yes! Yes, in fact, I am the Christ!" Would anything have changed? Suddenly, would his parables, his countercultural teachings, and his strange miracles have coalesced into a neat package his listeners could tuck under their arms and carry home? I doubt it. Jesus was a storytelling rabbi — far more interested in formation than in formula.

Maybe, by refusing to "speak plainly," Jesus was honoring human life for the incredibly complicated thing it is. After all, one doesn't "speak plainly" about the greatest mysteries of the universe. Jesus came to teach us about truth, about love, and about eternal life. One doesn't simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things— one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them, grows into them. One wrestles — and even in the wrestling, belongs.

Living as we do on this side of the Resurrection, we know that even the greatest miracle in human history was not enough to stop Jesus's followers from asking searing questions. Even the first eyewitnesses to the empty tomb struggled to

believe. Why should we — their heirs — be superior in any way? We are a wondering species, a wandering species, a species prone to stumbling all over ourselves. We are sheep, and our only hope is in the goodness of our ever-loving Shepherd. I suspect that Jesus's answer was not what the people in the temple that day wanted to hear. They wanted to believe from the outside. They wanted a version of proof that would not require them to step into the smelly sheep pen and muck around with the other sheep. They wanted certainty without risk. Truth without trust. A Messiah who would provide but not provoke. That kind of "plain telling," Jesus said, is not available. The only knowing on offer is an incarnational knowing. A knowing that happens within and among the fold. Why? Because the belief Jesus is interested in has little to do with our intellects. Or, rather it exceeds our intellects. To "believe" in the Gospel sense means to trust, to lean, to depend, to throw my lot in with. It's an orientation of the heart and the gut. A willingness to stake everything I've got on the person, the character, the life, the death, and the resurrection of God's Son. It's not abstract. It's learned and earned through relationship.

In a beautiful sermon entitled, "Message in the Stars," Frederick Buechner makes the point this way: "It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get."

Sheep know their shepherd because they are his; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his shadow, beneath his rod and staff, within constant earshot of his voice. They believe because they have surrendered to his care, his authority, his leadership, and his guidance. There is no belonging from the outside; Christianity is not a spectator sport. Belong, Jesus says. Consent to belong. Belief will follow.