

August 23, 2020

Matthew 16:13-30; Romans 12:1-8

“New Life in Christ”

The global coronavirus pandemic is disrupting life across the world. Businesses and schools are trying to figure out how to work and slow the spread of the virus. Millions of people are unemployed. We’re all adjusting to wearing a face mask while shopping, exercising, and going to any public building.

We’re worshipping through Zoom because the virus is most easily transmitted in indoors when people are talking and singing, like a worship service. Places we associate with community and connection, which is so important to our spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing, are now public health dangers. Singing, preaching, responsive prayer when done indoors with more than 10 people are a potential threat to our health. For persons over 65 and living with chronic conditions such as diabetes and conditions affecting the heart and lungs they could be fatal.

The virus has killed 810,000 people around the world. Over 180,000 of those deaths are in the United States, 6389 in Michigan, including 156 in Kent County. Trinity is a high-risk congregation. That’s why we’re gathering for worship every Sunday with our computers, tablets, smartphones and telephones. When the daily new case numbers decline for 14 consecutive days it will be safe to return to our building and sanctuary with many precautions in place.

It is much safer to meet in small groups of less than ten people. This is the perfect time to revive a long-discarded part of our Methodist tradition.

The Methodist movement that spread from England to America and around the world was powered by people who met in small groups every week. Faith was formed and helped to grow and mature by the mutual support and accountability for following Jesus in the world experienced in those small groups. Countless people were moved to serve with Christ by feeding hungry people, collecting and distributing clothing and medicine for poor people and families, visiting prisoners, teaching children to read, caring for the sick, and comforting people in mourning. Methodists were known as the people who love God and love people. The small groups are where those Methodists were equipped to join Jesus’ mission in the world.

Now is the time to revive the Methodist small groups. I’ve been in a small group for 30 years. Not the same group. But wherever I’ve lived I’ve either formed or joined a small group that meets for one hour a week. Each of us shares what we’ve done, or not done, to witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I learned a long time ago I need the weekly support of my group to help me make sure I’m doing what I need to do follow Jesus and grow in holiness of heart and life.

Living the Christian life, a life shaped by loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind and loving who God loves, is not possible by our own individual faith and will. We need the support, encouragement, forgiveness, and accountability of other Christians who are walking this pilgrimage with us. Our faith, hope, and love are stronger when we are united with a community centered in the life and mission of Jesus Christ than they could ever be as solitary individuals.

That’s what Jesus is getting at in today’s Gospel lesson. He asks the disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And they tell him what they’ve heard among the crowds. Then

Jesus asked a more direct question, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter spoke up first and declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus affirmed Peter’s declaration by saying, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Jesus use a play on words with Peter’s name. The Greek for “Peter” is “Petros”, which means “rock.” So “Peter” could also be “Rocky.”

In all four Gospels Peter is the leader of the twelve disciples. When we read the Gospels it’s helpful to remember Peter represents the disciples and discipleship. What Jesus is saying in this declaration is he will build his church on the “rock”, the foundation, of discipleship.

A contemporary pastor and writer, Mike Breen, puts it this way in his book, *Building a Discipling Culture*,

If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples. ... Effective discipleship builds the church, not the other way around. We need to understand the church is the *effect* of discipleship and not the *cause*. If you set out to build the church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples. It is far more likely that you will create consumers who depend on the spiritual services that religious professionals provide.

So, Jesus is telling us building the church is his work. He will do his job. But he needs his disciples doing their job. The risen Christ tells us what his disciple’s job:

God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.

These verses from Matthew 28 is where The United Methodist Church’s mission statement comes from. The traditional translation of the original Greek begins, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” This is also Trinity’s mission statement. I know some are uncomfortable with the phrase “make disciples.” Eugene Peterson’s translation, which I read earlier more clearly translates the Greek: “Go out and train everyone you meet ... in this way of life.” Training in the way of Jesus. That’s how people are formed into disciples of Jesus Christ.

Baptism marks the beginning of a life of training to live and love like Jesus. That’s what Paul means in the Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Training for a race or a game, or to make music with any instrument, or any discipline requires the “living sacrifice” of your heart, soul, and mind; your whole self must be all in. Discipleship with Jesus Christ is just like that. Jesus wants all of you. Nothing held back. That’s what he says in his summary of his way of life:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus wants all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. When you love someone or something, like baseball, music, movies, art, science, etc. you give everything you have to that discipline or that person. That’s what discipleship is. Loving like Jesus 100%. That’s what Paul means when he writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds He’s saying, stop resisting God. Give into grace. And conform your life and your love to the way of Jesus. Love and justice is the way of Jesus and his kingdom.

Because living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and citizen of God’s kingdom is counter to the dominant culture of the world, we need to be part of a community centered in Jesus’ way of life and mission. That’s what the church is supposed to be. Being part of a small group with other Christ followers that meets regularly for mutual support and accountability for living the Christian life will help you be make sure you are minding your heart, soul, and mind. Keeping them centered on Christ and not being distracted by others.

If you are interested in exploring this way of discipleship I hope you will join the book study I’m leading next month. It’s my hope and prayer that when that study is concluded we will organize some small groups I call “Grace Groups” at Trinity.

If you’re interested in hosting a Grace Group I’d love to hear from you. Send me an email or text message or call me on the phone.