

5.1.2022 Easter 3 (All-Parish Retreat)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 9:1-20, Psalm 30, Revelation 5:11-14, Matthew 28:16-20

“Christ’s Mission is Our Ministry to the World”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Alleluia! Christ is risen. *Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!* Today it is fitting that St. Mark’s All-Parish Retreat takes place during the season of Easter. Today’s gospel contains the Easter words of Jesus, “*I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” Today as we talk together about our mission and ministry in Christ’s name as St. Mark’s, we remember Christ’s promise that he is always with us.

The past two years have been challenging in many ways. We have not always been able to gather together and talk about our mission. Nevertheless we have worked hard during these two years. We have adjusted our worship and ministry focus many times, yet we have not always been able to gather together, reflecting upon the ways Christ continues to be with us in the midst of life’s joys and challenges. Today we gather together to envision and discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us as a congregation of the ELCA.

The gospel text for today and for our retreat is “The Great Commissioning” of Matthew, chapter 28. This text about Jesus sending his disciples into the world in mission to make disciples of all nations, baptize and teach is well known. Jesus promises his disciples the Easter reality of his risen presence, saying, “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

This gospel text has often been used in the commissioning of missionaries to global service, and as a former ELCA missionary to Japan, it is a text I have thought about a great deal. It is also one that was often on my mind as I taught church history at the Lutheran college and seminary in Tokyo.

It is impossible for me to preach on this text without also saying that this text has been misunderstood at certain times in the church’s history. Jesus’ sending of his disciples with the words, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*” were spoken long before the church became part of the Roman Empire. We don’t have time today to fully unpack the history of Christianity and empire, but it needs to be said at the outset that the church has also participated in the conquest and colonialism of empire throughout its history.

This aspect of the church’s history is an unfortunate misunderstanding of this text that should always be on our minds as we think about mission. The church benefited from and enabled

colonial enterprises that oppressed peoples throughout the world. Such a history is based upon a misunderstanding of Jesus' words in this text.

Jesus said, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...*" Jesus did not, and does not, send his church as an arm of empire or a colonizing project; rather, the authority of heaven and earth given to Jesus is the authority of the love shared between the Father and the Son and expressed through the Holy Spirit. Jesus sends his church into the world to be a living sign of his love, forgiveness and hope. Jesus promises to be with his followers throughout history "to the end of the age." Authority is given to Jesus for the purpose not of conquest, but for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of a broken and sinful world.

Today's reading from Acts reveals Jesus' authority of love and forgiveness for a sinful man named Saul. However, Saul also possessed authority, a different kind of authority, by which he was traveling to arrest Christians. Ananias described it, saying, "*Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.*"

Saul's worldly imperial authority had been granted under Roman law, that as a Roman citizen and a Jew, he could arrest and bring to trial matters related to Judaism even in foreign places. Saul was able to travel and arrest those who belonged to The Way because Judaism had been recognized under Roman law. On the road to Damascus, the imperial authority of Saul was met by the authority of Jesus' love and forgiveness. Overcome by this encounter, Saul was given a new identity and understanding of himself. Paul's story should make us pause each time we hear it because the authority of Jesus was love and forgiveness for a sinful man. This is the mission of Jesus, to find, forgive and transform a sinful humanity.

People like Saul still exist. We live in a world in which people, armed with worldly authority, still breath threats and murder against their fellow sisters and brothers. Under the guise of nationalism and colonialist expansion, the world continues to be threatened. People of differing ethnicities and gender identities continue to be threatened by a dominant culture seeking to misuse Jesus' name and authority. Whenever and wherever Jesus' authority is twisted to exclude others from his love and forgiveness, Jesus' authority is misunderstood.

Jesus' mission is to equip and send his church into the world not with worldly authority, not breathing threats to conquer or oppress, but rather, with the authority of his love and forgiveness that transforms and gives humanity a new identity as children of God.

Each Sunday with Jesus's words, "*Go therefore,*" we are sent again and again into Charlotte, a city of many nations and ethnicities, to make disciples, baptize and teach. Today following our service we will have time to talk together as a church about our mission and ministries. Talking together is a healthy sign of a church led by the Holy Spirit in God's love. We will divide into small groups and I encourage you to share ideas. We will then come back together into a large group and hear the findings of each group, closing with fellowship and lunch together.

This church has many gifts, the greatest of which is its servant's heart. The authority of Jesus is the loving heart of God who seeks to serve and to give peace to a frightened and anxious world. When the disciples went to the mountain that Jesus had directed them, they saw him and worshiped him, but some doubted. Each Sunday, we too, come to worship Jesus bringing our doubts and our fears. We are no different than those disciples, yet Jesus sent them in mission to serve.

Only in service to Jesus and to our neighbor do we overcome our doubts and fears. Only in serving with Jesus do we realize that Jesus is always with us. Jesus sends us into an anxious and fearful world. The world needs signs of hope and peace in the midst of war, hatred and oppression of those who seem different.

Jesus says us also, "*Go therefore...*" so that in serving with his authority of love, we will continue to be empowered by the living presence of Jesus. Jesus sends us, and churches like us, around the world to be signs in our communities that Jesus' promises are real.

Jesus is with his people to the end of the age.

Christ's mission of love is our ministry to the world. Amen.