

“Will We Carry Jesus' Message Forward?”

Friends – longtime and new, fellow soul-weary humans, we are gathered on this warm and humid late spring morning to worship God – the fathomless and expansive Love that has created us and continues to be our greatest source of strength and resilience through each and every joy, challenge and grief we encounter along the journey. As we enter into a time of wondering if we will carry Jesus’ message forward, I invite you to please pray with me.

God of all, our spirits are so tired, aching with some of our own pain and with the reverberations of suffering we hear in the cries of your peoples in all directions. And we wonder, will we harness the faith, hope and love required to carry forward Jesus’ message of your abiding love? As you move within each of us and among us this morning, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Somewhere along the arc of my seminary studies, in preparation for answering the call to become a pastor, I learned that some preachers aim within their sermons to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This turn of phrase (comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable) has also been used by artists and activists across the past century. It was originally written by US journalist and humorist Peter Dunne Finley in 1902, referring to what a newspaper might do in reporting the many details of civic life. Given the many deeply troubling events unfolding in the world in recent days, weeks and months (events we know have been emboldened by attitudes and policies that have been in place, in some cases, for many years), today feels like a fitting moment to share with you that I am one of those preachers.

I weekly aim for a balance between comforting the afflicted and afflicting (that is, troubling) the comfortable. I try to comfort us with truths of Love's power and our belovedness to fortify our resilience for facing the realities that are afflicting us (be they troubling realities in our private spheres or in our shared public sphere). I try to trouble us in areas where our sitting comfortably might run the risk of sliding into complacency with and detachment from the afflictions of others. I have often admitted that I aim to ask questions that cause me to squirm a bit with dis-ease and step back to really examine myself, trusting that others of you might benefit in squirmy ways from the same questions that cause me pause.

As we examine our scripture readings today, touching into hope and imagining ourselves carrying forward Jesus' message, I wonder:

- In what ways might you create more space for God's Holy Spirit to comfort you, reminding you of God's immeasurable goodness and your agency as a beloved of God?
- And I also wonder, in what ways might you further open yourself, holding a posture of vulnerability and trust, so that God's Holy Spirit might disturb you in ways that you and the world need?

Hong Gwi-Seok is a Korean American teacher of Iyengar Yoga. She approaches Iyengar Yoga as creative art, meditation, and a healing justice practice for each individual and for their communities. I invite you to listen to her words of encouragement (both comforting and disturbing) for living in this painful moment in the life of the world. Perhaps – across the arc of your life – your parents, educators and other nurturing ones have modeled for you how to grieve in raw, truth-embracing, embodied, healing ways. And perhaps we could each benefit from an encouraging reminder of how to grieve in a healing way.

I invite you (wherever you are) to close your eyes if you'd like as Hong Gwi-Seok's words wash over you. *"america, let's take time to sit in the grief. not to rush it. to really feel it. unless we embrace grief, loss, and suffering, we will never really grow up. we will not be able to metabolize it and digest it. we will act from deep deficit and denial, and not from compassion. we will lash out, blame, numb ourselves, deepen our addictions. instead we need to hold each other and weep. take your grief to the ocean, the mountains, the forests, your garden, the trees. weep, and let the fear and rage bubble up. stay in it, flail, moan, kick, shake, whatever you need to do. let it move through you. do this multiple times each day, every day, never stop. because this is what it means to be alive, to be open, to be in community. eventually right action will become clear to you. step with humility and strong will into right action, after you have shed many, many tears. metabolized grief fuels right action. never skip a day. grieve daily and fully to stay awake on the path."* Yoga teacher Hong Gwi-Seok posted those words on her Facebook page on May 27th. And if you would like to return to these wise words, please know that we always post the sermon texts on our website in coming days as well.

Let's now listen for what the voice of God might be telling us through our scripture readings for this Ascension Sunday. Every year on this day, we read the narrative of Jesus' transcendent departure from the Earth and from the sight of his closest disciples. As mysterious as the experience may have been for the disciples, Jesus' instructions to them were very clear. We heard Mindy read,

"Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem. 'Wait, rather, for what God has promised, of which you have heard me speak,' Jesus said. 'John baptized with water, but within a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the Earth.

Jesus meant these clear instructions for each of us as well as we seek to carry his message forward by embodying compassionate, justice-making love. Are we willing and receptive as we listen to Jesus' message to us, letting his words comfort us where necessary and disturb us where necessary?

- I wonder, in what current circumstances is the love of God calling you to not leave, but rather to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon you and renew your power?
- I wonder, will you surrender to the Holy Spirit's baptism, immersed in the knowledge of your belovedness and power?
- Will we as People's Congregational Church be witnesses to God's holy, loving Spirit in the St. Croix Valley, throughout Minnesota, and even to the ends of the Earth?

As Mindy shared when introducing our reading from the letter to the Ephesians, the author prayed that God would empower the people of the fledgling church in Ephesus and Jesus' followers in all eras – to be the body of Christ (that is, the anointed one) beyond Jesus' lifetime. I'd like us to hear again two brief snippets from the letter. We heard these words, which have been handed down to us by our ancestors in faith:

"I pray that the God of our Savior Jesus Christ, the God of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, to bring you a rich knowledge of the Creator."

- Friends, I pray that as you find the quiet center in coming days, you will feel the Spirit of wisdom and revelation coming upon you. We also heard, *“I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see the hope this call holds for you—the promised glories that God's holy ones will inherit, and the infinitely great power that is exercised for us who believe.”*
- Friends, in these troubled times, I pray that a cloud will move out of the way so that you can see the hope available through your embodiment of God's Love.

Finally in our gospel reading for today, Jesus prays that God's love will be glorified (that is, Love exalted, Love worshipped) through Jesus' followers and through all with whom they share love, such that all will be unified by the love of God. I invite you to close your eyes again to hear Jesus' prayer wash over you and invite you, include you in its hope.

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all may be one...

*...To them I have revealed your Name,
and I will continue to reveal it
so that the love you have for me
may live in them,
just as I may live in them.”*

- Friends, I pray that you will be uplifted in the coming days by the knowledge that Jesus will reveal the love of the one God through you and through this congregation (for the good of the world).

Later in the service, we will sing of a God who rules with power that keeps company with pain. May we lean into God's love to empower us to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll, People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
May 29, 2022 (Memorial Day Weekend, Ascension Sunday)
Acts 1: 1-9, Ephesians 1: 15-23, John 17: 18-23, 26