**A Little Less than Divine?**

A Meditation on Matthew 28: 16 – 20, Psalm 8 and 2 Corinthians 13: 11 – 13

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church June 7, 2020

Let us begin at the place where we usually end: with a charge and benediction:

*Put things in order, respond to my encouragement, be in harmony with each other, and live in peace—and the God of love and peace will be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* 2 Corinthians 13: 11b, 13

God will be *with* you.

Jesus promises the disciples, “I will be with you.”

And I have always received those words as words of comfort, words of hope. I can “rest easy” because God is with me. I can be at peace in the midst of conflict or disagreement because God is with me. Maybe not on “my side” but “with” me. No reason to fear the strange sounds in the night: God is with me. And I believe all of that to be true. God’s presence is strengthening, comforting, a reassurance in times of fear or trouble. But what if that is not all God means by “with”? What if Jesus intends to do more for his disciples than comfort them?

What if Jesus’ words to the disciples also refer to his *discomforting* presence? Can’t you see it? Jesus had prepared them for his departure. He had told them all along he would not be with them forever. Now, as he prepares to leave them, you can hear some of them breathe a secret sigh of relief. Some of them think to themselves, “I can sleep in tomorrow!” or “Tomorrow, I won’t have to give my lunch away!” or “Tomorrow, I can go fishing…*alone*!”

When Jesus says to the disciples, “I will be with you, we can be sure that his intention is both to comfort *and* compel. The Spirit, which Jesus gives to them, is not a stagnant being. Wind and flame are kinetic, alive. Wind must flow, flame must burn. Without motion they cease to be what they are: wind is just air, flame is just smoke. Sniff the air. Does it smell a little stagnant? Have our insulated double pane windows locked the Spirit out of the church? Has She grown tired of throwing herself against the windows, wondering why we have kept Her out? Wind can cool us with its breath *and* disrupt us with its intensity. When we welcome the Spirit’s wind, we welcome both of these aspects. Same for fire. Fire can warm us body and soul and scorch us with its fury. There is both comfort and disruption. That is the way of God. [[1]](#endnote-1)

Thinking about all this took me back to last Sunday’s worship. When we come to the communion table, I break bread and pour the cup and invite you to participate from home. The few of us who are here, receive communion after the service, using individual cups and wafers. Last Sunday, we were one serving short, and so I returned to the communion table to receive the elements. The loaf last week, was naan, a flatbread common to Asia and Indonesia. This particular loaf was not purchased with communion in mind, but we needed a loaf, and I had it on hand. I imagine that is what you are doing with your communion at home – cookies, toast, a muffin. Whatever you have. Since this naan had not been purchased to use for communion, it was not a plain loaf. It was an herb garlic bread. Delicious with a salad or soup. Not so delicious when dipped in a chalice of grape juice. Having broken the bread during the service, I knew what I would be tasting now. It was a disgusting combination. It was the truly terrible bread of heaven and cup of salvation. Terrible.

Which on some days is the metaphor we need. I much prefer the sweetness of the communion bread to which we are accustomed, baked by Ralph in the church kitchen on Sunday mornings. It is the “perfect pairing” with Welch’s grape juice. Once I remember at University Presbyterian, the person preparing communion brought rye bread. I don’t think it was intentional. It was an unsliced loaf of bread, purchased at Publix, and unsliced loaves are not always easy to find. When we passed the loaf around, the seeds caught in our throats, they lodged in our teeth. Around the communion circle, people quietly coughed. We had to accept the discomfort.

I often hear stories from parents who visit our church. They tell me that one of the things their kids talk about is the deliciousness of the bread. That is what they take away from worship. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. For children, Jesus’ table should be every sweetness imaginable. A comfort found in bread. They will have a lifetime to learn the story of all that leads up to that table, and all that follows it. They will have a lifetime to explore its’ mysteries. As adults we often need to return to that reassuring sweetness as well. But as we grow in our faith, we may need more moments when we want to spit out the garlic herb body of Christ, more moments when we choke on the seeds that have caught in our throats. Those are the moments that remind us that God’s love is a disrupting presence in our often too comfortable lives.

It is simply not enough to say, “I’m not really in to wind and flames, I think I will just stick with stagnant air, smoke and ashes.” We all need to embrace the wind and the flame.

This week I attended several peaceful protests, and at each one youth or young adults spoke. People of color who are tired of seeing their friends and family members murdered by those who should keep them safe spoke up. They led us in prayer, they led us in chanting. They led us in marching. They invited us to kneel. They urged everyone to be peacemakers for change. This morning we heard the psalmist say, “from the mouths of nursing babies you have laid a strong foundation because of your foes, in order to stop vengeful enemies.” Let us add the voices of the youth, to the mouths of the babes, all innocents, all vulnerable ones. These innocents are stepping into the wind of God’s Spirit, they are walking through fire for the sake of others.

Why? Maybe because they have believed the words of the psalmist, who, in humility, writes that God has created humans “only slightly less than divine.” I can’t remember a morning when I have woken up and thought to myself, “I feel practically divine today!” But that is how God sees us. That is how God created us, each human being on this earth. When we have discounted others, discriminated against others, stood silently by while injustice is taking place all around us, we have not lived up to the image in which we were created.

There’s been a poem floating around social media this week. It was inspired by various posts and memes wishing that 2020 could be cancelled. This miserable year of COVID-19 and too many black deaths at the hands of police. A year of unemployment and business closings, and cancellations of all kinds. The author is Leslie Dwight:

*"What if 2020 isn't cancelled?  
What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for?   
A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw - that it finally forces us to grow.   
A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us from our ignorant slumber.   
A year we finally accept the need for change.  
Declare change.  
Work for change.  
Become the change.  
A year we finally band together, instead of pushing each other further apart.   
2020 isn't cancelled, but rather the most important year of them all."*

Jesus’ departure wasn’t a permission slip to sit back, to stay home, to put up your feet. Jesus’ departure was and is the invitation to be his presence in the world, with all the sweat and tears and strain which that implies. All the sacrifice. An invitation to each of his disciples, and that includes you.

So if you participate in communion today, or the next time you do celebrate the sacrament, savor it. If it is a paper wafer, with no flavor at all, think of all that says. A flavorless Christ? Impossible. If it is sweet bread, then invite God to nourish you with it so that you may embrace the wind and flame without fear. If it is a savory cracker and you take it with wine, then pay attention to every nuance. The saltiness of the cracker, the weight and power of the wine. Bread of heaven. Cup of salvation. Receive it and believe in all that it symbolizes: a world reborn, life beyond death, God’s triumph over evil and injustice.

With every passing week we have witnessed the pain of God’s people: grieving illness and death, grieving murder, grieving police brutality, grieving the callousness of a President who cannot extend compassion to the people he is supposed to lead. So much pain. Let us pray that these are the labor pains which will birth a new understanding of community. Let us labor together, to “*put things in order…to be in harmony with each other, and live in peace—” And may all God’s people say, “amen.”*

1. Matt Skinner, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5436>. (With thanks to Matt Skinner for this idea that Jesus being “with us” as a word of challenge as well as comfort.) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)