

May 16, 2010

Scripture: John 17: 20-26

Sermon: "God's New Age"

As we continue our journey after Easter and prepare for Pentecost, we read this morning about Jesus' last moments with his disciples according to the Gospel of John. For the past few weeks, we've heard John's version of Jesus' last minute instructions for his disciples and this week, we've heard about the very last moment that he has with his disciples before his arrest, betrayal, and crucifixion.

And for us, as people of the resurrection, it seems sort of strange that we are hearing about Jesus' last moments with his disciples when just a few weeks ago we heard and celebrated the rest of the story: Jesus' resurrection.

It seems sort of strange to go back and take a look at these last few moments that Jesus had with his disciples, to hear once again his instructions, to get a glimpse into a very intimate moment between master and disciples, between teacher and students, between Jesus and his friends. It may seem strange to go back and review the instructions once more, especially in light of what we know as the rest of the story: the resurrection.

Or does it?

The more and more I thought of these last few moments with Jesus and his disciples, and the more and more I thought of the uncertainty of our world, the more and more I begin to crave words of comfort. The more and more I needed to hear that someone was praying for me, for us, for God's creation. The more and more I needed to hear that God was in control, that God was and is still working, that God will have the last word. With every angry, hurtful word in the media, with every broken relationship that divides the Body of Christ, with every separation in our world bombarding me, bombarding us as people of faith, the more and more we need to hear the promises of God's new age, the promises of God's Kingdom here on earth, to hear the promises of God's peaceable Kingdom where the lion will lay down with the lamb, where swords are beaten into plowshares.

Probably very much like the disciples that night in the upper room, after Jesus shares that he is going to die, especially after Jesus shares that one of his very own will betray him, especially after Jesus shares that one of his will deny him. After hearing these words, their foundations of faith, of certainty, begin to crumble. They begin to look around the room and no longer see brothers in faith, but betrayers, deniers, doubters, people who will only look out for themselves. They no longer are Jesus' disciples. After hearing these words that change their world once again, they become the Body, broken, the Body, divided, the Body, at odds.

At that very moment, The disciples need words of comfort. They need words of peace. They need words of prayer. And that is exactly what Jesus lifts up to God on their behalf.

At that moment, when all the disciples can see are broken relationship, at that moment, when all the disciples can hear are angry hurtful words coming from their brothers' mouths, Jesus offers

them words of comfort, not in the form of instruction, but in the form of prayer on their behalf. Jesus offers them unity. Jesus offers them hope.

As I worked on this sermon, I started thinking about the disciples who were gathered around Jesus that night in the upper room, overhearing this prayer. They had just finished dinner and needless to say, it was different from their usual Passover feasts. Jesus calls them to be servant leaders and when he realizes that they aren't getting the concept, he unwraps his robe, grabs a towel and a basin of water, and then gently washes their feet with care. And then after this act, Jesus tells them that he will be leaving them soon but they will not be left completely alone. That God will be sending the Holy Spirit to work on their behalf, to guide them and comfort them, to give them strength for the journey.

And if this talk about being servant leaders and the Holy Spirit wasn't confusing enough, Jesus begins to talk about his death. He begins to say how one of his disciples would betray and how Peter would deny him. This was not their usual Passover feast.

And then to top it all off, Jesus gives them a new commandment: to love another as Jesus loved them, to rely and support one another, to be responsible to and for one another.

It was an uncomfortable time after dinner. No one knew exactly what was going on. They had a million questions but aren't sure where to begin to start asking any of them. They were confused. They were scared. And they just wanted it to go back to the way it was, to the way it used to be when Jesus would teach them about the Kingdom of God, the way it used to be when crowds followed them, the way it was before all this talk about death and dying started. The disciples were in a very uncomfortable time of uncertainty and no one knows the answers. No one knows what the future would hold for them. No one knows how it was all going to turn out.

And at this moment of confusion, at this moment of uncertainty for the disciples, Jesus offers them a few last words. And these last words are not "instructions on how be better but a prayer to God" on their behalf. And the disciples are invited to listen in on this conversation, on this very intimate moment between Jesus and God, on this very real, very emotional, very vulnerable moment which shows how much Jesus cares for his disciples, for his friends.

And as I pondered the disciples' reaction to this moment of confusion, this moment of insecurity, to this moment of uncertainty, I realized that this prayer is simply not just prayed on behalf of Jesus' disciples who lived two thousand years ago, but that this prayer is prayed by Jesus on behalf of you. It is prayed on behalf of me. It is prayed on behalf of all of us as communities of faith. And it is a word of reassurance in an unsettling time. It is a word of encouragement in a time of uncertainty. It is a word of strength for the journey ahead.

And that is the Good News that I bring this morning. we "can take heart that others have been here before us", in times of uncertainty. And we can remember "that we have one another. That we have assurance of the Word. That we have the comfort of knowing that 'we are a community for whom Jesus prays.' "

By offering a prayer on the disciples' behalf and on our behalf, Jesus is "entrust[ing] the community to God's care." Jesus is offering up the hope and the fervent desire that the community of faith will live a life "shaped by the knowledge of" God's love. Jesus is reminding God of God's promises of security, the promises of protection, and the promises of new life. Jesus is offering up the comfort that is found in the arms of God for his followers then, two thousand years ago and now.

Jesus is offering up a prayer of strength on our behalf as followers who have experienced the power of new life through the resurrection. And it is only by looking back and remembering this prayer through the lens of the resurrection; we will have the strength to continue our journey through this uncertain time.

As Jesus is praying on that night, surrounded by his disciples, lifting up words of comfort, words of hope, words of prayer, he is reminding his disciples that they are one, united in faith, united in their calling, united in Spirit. And that unity will give them strength, give them comfort, give them hope during uncertain and certain times because they are connected as one Body, responsible to and for each other, just as Jesus is connected to God, they are connected to God as well. One Body, One Lord, One Calling

Through his prayer, Jesus reminds the disciples that God has formed an astonishingly different community here on earth and they are connected. And this community represents God's New Age, because it is a community that is not based on labels. It is not a community that divides, separates or excludes. It is not a community that thrives on uniformity, but celebrates everyone's gifts for ministry, celebrates the diversity and uniqueness of all God's children, and celebrates that there is one calling, one faith, one Baptism and one Lord God of all.

And through Jesus' words of his prayer, he reminds his disciples the strength and purpose of this community rests securely in God's grace. God's grace empowers, renews, refreshes and builds up God's Kingdom here on earth. God's grace is what will give the disciples comfort for the journey and God's grace is what will sustain God's New Age here on earth.

And as followers of Jesus Christ, we find comfort and strength knowing that God is in control, that our identity as disciples rests securely in God's care and in God's grace, and we understand that the future of our community as the Body of Christ is in God's hands. One Body, One Baptism, One Faith, One Lord of all.

We can find comfort, strength and hope that we are a part of the community for whom Jesus prays. And that is the Good News for this community of faith at Midway Christian Church. We are a part of the community for whom Jesus prays, united, connected, strengthened by God's grace for the journey ahead.

And what better news to share with all of God's children right now because We as a nation, as a world, as a community are going through a time of uncertainty. We have a million and one questions about how it is all going to work out and what the future will hold for us. Things seem to be falling apart everyday. And we find that more and more we need words of comfort, words of strength. More and more we need to know that someone is praying for us on our behalf.

And the Good News is that in this time of uncertainty, we are invited to listen in on the prayer that Jesus is lifting up on our behalf and to find comfort, strength and hope in being a part of the community for whom Jesus prays.

The Good News is that Jesus' last words to us as people of faith is not a list of instruction on how to be better people, or to live out our faith more fully in our lives. Jesus' last words to us as people faith is a prayer to God on our behalf.

The Good News is that we are a part of the community for whom Jesus prays, united, connected, strengthened by God's grace for the journey ahead.

May we take comfort and encouragement that we have God there to guide us and lead us during these times of uncertainty. Amen.