

“Parting Remarks”

John 17: 20-26

Today, we encounter Jesus’ last moments with his disciples according to the Gospel of John. The text we read today is part of a larger section called the “Farewell Disclosure. It is John’s version of Jesus’ last minute instructions for his disciples. These are Jesus’ parting remarks.

It always amazes me that we as people of faith don’t spend more time focusing on these last few moments Jesus had with his disciples. We usually only hear them during Holy Week when we celebrate Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But, these verses are so much more than simply Holy Week texts. In these parting remarks, Jesus shows his disciples, tells his disciples and in turn shows us all we need to know to continue living out our calling as disciples of Christ.

You see, Jesus is intentional in choosing what he says, as his parting remarks. Instead of a list of instructions or a to do lists, all things we would expect Jesus to give his disciples, instead Jesus’ last words to his disciples are a prayer, making these last words which Jesus shares with his disciples all the more powerful and moving.

And here’s why I say that: As I worked on this sermon, I started thinking about the disciples who were gathered around Jesus that night in the upper room,

the ones who were overhearing this prayer. The disciples thought they were gathering for their usual Passover feast only to discover Jesus had something else in mind. Jesus changes the familiar Passover liturgy into a call for them to be servant leaders. With this change, Jesus reminds them that their mission is not to sit back and expect only God to save God's people. They are now called to be active partners in the work of building up the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

When Jesus realizes that the disciples are not getting this concept of servant leader, he shows them what he means. Jesus unwraps his robe, grabs a towel and a basin of water, and then begins gently washing the disciples' feet with care.

At this point, if this talk about being servant leaders wasn't confusing enough and let's face it intimidating enough for the disciples, having Jesus wash their feet certainly didn't help matters. But it doesn't stop there. Jesus goes on. He begins to talk about his death. He begins talking about how he will leave them. He tells them that he will not leave them alone, that the Advocate will be there, strengthening them for the journey ahead.

At this point, I'm sure Fear and Worry were taking over for the disciples. Uncertainty about the future was flooding in. And what was worse, I imagine, were the doubts which began to fill the disciples' mind after hearing Jesus' words. Because, let's face it, the disciples had not been the most stellar students under

Jesus' mentoring during his time here on earth. And he was leaving them, leaving us to carry on the mission...

“What on earth is Jesus thinking? Entrusting the disciples, entrusting us with this mission of love and grace for the world?” He has got to be kidding!

It had to be an uncomfortable time for the disciples after that dinner. No one knew exactly what was going on. They probably had a million questions but didn't even know where to begin in asking any of them.

At this moment, after Jesus had said all this stuff to the disciples, basically commissioning them to go out into the world as his followers, I'm sure the disciples were probably confused, certainly scared. And I bet one of the thoughts which kept circling around in their minds was Can't we just go back to the way it was, to the way it used to be when Jesus would teach us about the Kingdom of God, the way it used to be when crowds followed Jesus around? Can't we just go back to the way it was, the way it was before all this talk about death and dying started?

As I have pondered this moment of uncertainty for the disciples, I can't help but think we as people of faith are feeling the same way nowadays.. Churches are closing each and every day. People have so many things that they would rather do than come to church on a Sunday morning. We live in a time where the future of the church, the future for the church is so uncertain. This feeling of uncertainty. is

not unique to Midway Christian Church. It is happening in all church, large and small, in all denominations, all across the world.

However, I wonder if there is something more going on here than a gloom and doom narrative. I wonder if there is something more happening here...because earlier this week. I was talking with someone about the declining trend happening within so many of the institutions which are a part of our society, including the decline of the Church. Another person joined our conversation and as he was leaving shared with us some very powerful parting remarks....

This person said, “You only want us younger people to come to church because you need someone to pick up the pieces. You don’t really care about what is going on in our lives. The church doesn’t care that people are hungry, that people are struggling in poverty. The church only cares about the numbers. All the church wants is for us young people to come in, fill in the empty positions, and give money. The church doesn’t care about anything else except its own survival.”

Ouch! How does one respond to this? The sad thing is I know he is right. It does seem like the Church’s only message to the world is come fill our empty pews, come help us make our budget. It does seem like the Church’s only message to the world is come and join us but we want you to think and act like us. It does seem like the Church’s mission statement is: We need you but we don’t really care about you.

These parting remarks became a clear sign to me that somewhere along the way, we as people of faith truly have gotten away from this mission of love and grace with which Jesus entrusted to us on that night. They became a sign that we have forgotten Jesus' prayer for us as his disciples. They became a sign that it is the time to refresh our memories on just exactly what Jesus' said when he prayed to God on our behalf that night in the upper room.

You see there are basically three parts to Jesus' prayer: "1) the world can be difficult 2) Christianity does not provide an escape from life's difficulties but rather offers support to flourish amid them 3) We as disciples of Christ are here for a purpose: to care for this world God loves so much."

That's it. These three things are what Jesus' holds in prayer on behalf of his disciples. These are Jesus' parting remarks to us as his disciples, as the ones who are called to be active partners in the building up of the Kingdom of God here on Earth. We aren't given a list of what to do. We are given a mission. And It is the same mission Jesus had on earth, which is to care for this world God loves so much.

No one denies that the world we live in is changing. It is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. We don't all fit into nice neatly defined boxes. So it is no surprise that people don't want to come to church just to be forced to fit into

those boxes again. It is also no surprise that people don't want to come to church just to help give money to the budget.

What people do want when they come to worship, what people do what when they come to be a part of a community of faith is to have a real authentic life transforming experience with the Kingdom of God. People want us as people of faith to step into real life situations where it is messy, where it is full of grey areas. People want us as people of faith to love this world which God loves so much. People want us to make justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God in all we do and say.

Or in the words of one of my favorite authors, words that are so appropriate for us to hear as this Easter Season draws to a close. She says "Lately I've been wondering if a little death and resurrection might be just what the church needs right now, if maybe all this talk of waning numbers and shrinking influence means our empire building days are over, and if maybe that's a good thing. Death is something empires worry about, not something gardeners worry about. It's certainly not something resurrection people worry about...As the shape of Christianity changes and our churches adapt to a new world, we have a choice: we can drive our hearses around bemoaning every augur of death, or we can trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is busy making something new. As long as Christians are breaking the bread and pouring the wine...as long as we are

preaching the Word and paying attention, the church lives, and Jesus says the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. We might as well trust him, since he knows a thing or two about the way out of the grave."

As followers of Jesus, as disciples of Christ, as ones who praise a Risen Savior, Jesus has entrusted us with a mission to bring healing and wholeness for all of God' people. And now seems like a pretty good time to start, don't you think?
Amen.