

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

September 3, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 16: 21-28)

From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah,] Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The Gospel of our Lord.

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

This past Friday, I was trying to get my head around what has been happening this week in the State of Texas. I was watching all of the videos and reading all of the articles, and somewhere I saw a really interesting statistic. In the course of six days, 27 trillion gallons of water landed on Texas and Louisiana. 27 trillion — that's with a "t" — trillion gallons of water. What is that? Can you even imagine a number that big? It's beyond me, so I started working on it. I did the math.

This is a gallon. One gallon. You're supposed to drink about half of one of these every day to stay hydrated. A modern toilet takes one and a half of these to flush. An efficient showerhead uses two of these every minute. According to the E.P.A., the average American uses ninety of these during the course of the day. It seems a little high to me, but that's what they say. Ninety of these during the course of the day.

So, If you take all of the water that every person in the U.S. uses, all of the water that every man, woman and child in the U.S.A. uses over the course of 2.5 years, that's what got dumped on Texas last week.

What do you do when 27 trillion gallons of water falls on you? What do you do when your home, or your job, or your neighborhood just disappear? Where is your next meal coming from? Where will you sleep tonight? Who will take care of you, now that you can't take care of yourself? Now, those of us sitting here may not have experience with 27 trillion gallons of water. But we know loss. We know about losing a job, or not being able to make a rent payment, or losing a friend or a marriage or a great love. We know it's devastating.

So we join our brothers and sisters of Houston, asking big questions. Questions like: Why do such things happen? Or, how do you deal with the unknown, the unexpected, the unimaginable? Where is God in what happened? Where is God in any change or loss?

We come together at the end of this week hearing about such devastation. And we really want to hear some comfort, some sweetness, some beauty, and some hope.

And we get:

*"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed."*

And we get:

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

You know, Jesus, can't you just give us a break? We've lived with hate and the ripping open of racism in American through the events of Charlottesville. We've watched and have been deeply humbled by a solar eclipse. And we've been immersed in the divisive fear mongering of American politics all summer long. And now we're trying to get our heads around 27 trillion gallons of water. "Couldn't you give us a nice miracle today?" Or, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." No. We get, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." But change and loss are so hard. And still God speaks.

I think this text does have something to say to change and loss. I think there is hope here. I think, more than anything, these texts we read in today's Gospel are saying that change and loss are not all there are.

There is something bigger, something more important, something more central than even 27 trillion gallons of water and the devastation it wreaks. There is something more vast than a solar eclipse, something stronger than hate or separation among us. There is something more central and important than any fear or loss. There is something that can't change and can't be lost. There is something bigger, something worth letting everything else go.

Jesus begins today by saying, *"I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed."*

Now, I want to be clear on this. Jesus did not come to this world just to die. The point of God becoming human, of God living among us, of God becoming us, does not come down to dying on the cross. As if all God planned to do was become dead, and that would make all the difference.

God becoming human is about love and connection. It is a way to bind us to God and each other completely and forever. God's incarnation is a way to make clear to each one of us that we are loved. We are loved in all our human messiness, in all our needs. We are loved in our uniqueness. We are loved and gifted and have a purpose in this world.

Jesus' life among us helps us see the wholeness and healing that God's connection can bring. It helps us live in a way that embraces our connection with God and each other. God's incarnation revealed the abundance of sharing, the healing of forgiving, the hope of more than we can see right now. It reveals that every person is valued, every life has meaning, and every life is connected to every other life. Jesus' life, the incarnation of God, is about love and connection. And that is why Jesus died.

Jesus didn't die to do magic. His death was the result of the world trying to silence love and connection. In a world that's structured in a way that those who have more get more; in a world with narrow definitions of beauty and strength and goodness; in a world where race and sexuality and means of worshipping God, are all ways that divide us. In a world that fights to be bigger, faster, stronger, better, in that world love and connection are not a popular message. In that world, Jesus had to be stopped. In that world, love looks like three hours on a cross. The end. Silence. Death.

And Jesus was willing to go there. Jesus was willing to go there because he knew that the love of God and the interconnectedness of us all is the only thing in the world that makes sense. The only thing that is needed. And he wasn't going to back down or back away from that.

God becoming human is about love and connection. And death can't silence that. So Jesus rose from the dead, and continues to call us into the love and connections with God, the love and connections with each other.

The resurrection is God's way of saying, "You're not going to stop this." The love of God is stronger than the religious leaders and empire that crucified Jesus. It is beyond the mystery of death itself. It is more powerful than 27 trillion gallons of water.

Have you noticed what happened in the past few days? When everything in the city of Houston was ripped away, in the midst of great loss and fear, people were discovering love and connection in whole new ways.

A white grandma was rescued by a young black man on a Jet Ski. Several mosques opened up as shelters for rest and food and clothing. And people came in saying, "Gee, I've never been in a mosque before. Tell us about the place." A woman took in all of the neighborhood pets and cared for twenty-one dogs in her attic, until she could be rescued. A group of Katrina survivors hauled their own boats through the night into Houston, because they've been there. Connections. Love. Valuing every single life. The love of God made plain in the midst of loss and change.

Love is hard. Making connections outside the familiar is messy. Love is not always popular. We'll get it wrong. We can't always see it. We have a lot to learn. But there is something bigger than messy, something more powerful than failing, something that will change the landscape, more than 27 trillion gallons of water.

Jesus gave us a gift greater than anything we will face in this life. We are forever connected to God and forever connected to one another. And He calls us to live that out.

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

Live in love and connection, before anything else. That is our calling. That is what we do in the face of everything else.

Amen.