



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 3 (C)

Circles and the Sea

[RCL] Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

“The world is a circle without a beginning and nobody knows where it really ends.” Those are the opening lines of a song sung by Liv Ullman in the movie *Lost Horizon*. That song seems like a perfect metaphor for today’s gospel; Jesus’ third and final visit with his friends before the Ascension begins, where everything started, near the Sea of Tiberias.

When Jesus began his ministry, he was walking along the Sea of Galilee where he encountered two men: “Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen.” Jesus encouraged them to put down their nets and to become fishers of people. Shortly thereafter, he discovered James and John, the sons of Zebedee, working in the same sea. He called them as well to follow him. The fishermen gave up their families, communities, and their employment to join Jesus on an incredible journey. They traveled throughout the countryside and watched Jesus cure the sick and heal the lame. Jesus returned sight to the blind. All the while, he was instructing those four and others who joined his ministry on how to invite people into a different way of life.

Jesus appealed to them to inspire people to a way of love. Through his modeling, the teacher, the Rabbi, showed them how to care for those who were marginalized in some fashion in their communities.

At this moment, contemporary disciples are in the lifelong process of learning and modeling a way of life that is fully inclusive and filled with compassion. The war in Ukraine has been a stark example of the tension of barbarism and indecent bloodshed juxtaposed with grace and mercy, as neighboring countries open their borders and their hearts to millions of suddenly displaced people. The horror of watching the ravages of war is unmatched by those who are living through it and being forced out of their homes and away from family members. But Jesus has placed many disciples on their paths. Those Christ-like figures are setting up pop-up eateries and medical stations to assist those with the greatest need. They are opening their homes and offering shelter to women and children who have nowhere to go and are experiencing profound grief. It is the way the world is responding to those in crisis that is most pleasing to the Lord, who taught us that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

While many people around the world are watching and feeling helpless, God is offering an opportunity for everyone to look around and shed a light on those places in the world where other such atrocities are occurring. Sadly, millions of humans are experiencing horrific acts of violence worldwide, and the response to them has been slow or absent. Just as Jesus came back to visit his disciples to remind them of their purpose in life, so he reminds each of you that there is no greater calling than to tend to those in need.

Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John returned to something familiar following the death and resurrection of the beloved Jesus. They knew and were comfortable with the sea. They knew how to navigate those waters, even if sometimes their nets came up empty. There is a tendency in the human experience to return to the familiar after an overwhelming event. These disciples had witnessed the terrible death of Jesus. Some of them had gone to the tomb only to discover that Jesus was no longer there. They had gone into hiding for fear someone would come looking for them and execute them as well.

The good news is that God never abandons God's people. Jesus visits his fearful disciples in an upper room right after his resurrection to offer them comfort. He appears to them and says, "Peace be with you," and he tells them to go forth. He returns several days later to show Thomas, the doubting and missing disciple, his wounds and to prove that he was risen indeed. It is during this pivotal visit that Jesus delivers a message for all future generations. After allowing Thomas to feel his wounds, he chastises him and says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Your faith must guide and inform the work that you will do in the world. Christians worldwide are standing in a pivotal moment in history. Do you have the faith even of a mustard seed to follow the teachings of Jesus? Can you offer the peace and love of Christ to all earthly companions? If the answer is yes, go forth and work hard to meet the needs of all who are in desperate situations or despair. Organize ways to reach out to your neighbors who find themselves trying to escape the dangers and violence in their homelands.

This is the beginning of spring and a time when new flowers and other vegetation are waking from the dormant status of winter. The sign of new life is evident everywhere – just ask anyone with allergies. There is, however, grave concern for how the world is caring for God's creation. The season is about to begin for wildfires, hurricanes, and tsunamis. Those with vast resources appear to have the smallest resolve for employing the critical solutions necessary to avoid catastrophe. Many folks in economically deprived countries and areas of the world are ravaging some of the most important environmental resources like rainforests for survival's sake.

Our fishermen friends, Simon and his brother and the sons of Zebedee, would have many days of empty nets in some of the seas today because of pollution. My friends in Christ, Jesus was bound to the sea. He did not begin assembling his team by accident. He was drawn to those who understood the waters' beauty and wonder and had respect for God's creation. He could feed people from the sea. He could also offer rest in boats in those same waters. Our mission as we continue to care for our siblings who are in harm's way and are crying out for help is to also care for the rest of creation. The task is large, but by God's grace, so achievable.

Jesus returns to the Sea of Tiberias to visit with his friends once again. The circle continues as Jesus finds the disciples in the sea, searching for fish and coming up with empty nets. They have come full circle. He tells them to drop the nets on the other side of the boat and the fish are plentiful. He makes breakfast for them and feeds them the same meal he fed the multitudes – fish and bread. This time, they know the Lord when they see him.

Instead of recruiting them for ministry, Jesus has returned to exact promises: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Feed my lambs.” “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Tend my sheep.” “Do you love me?” he asks. “Feed my sheep.” Peter was exasperated because he knew that his love for Jesus was evident. Jesus makes clear that the mission going forward is to take care of God’s people. Love God’s people. All people are God’s people. During these fifty enlightening days of Easter, may we all form a circle around those seeking God’s love and unhesitatingly offer comfort and a sense of hope for better days ahead. Amen.

***The Rev. Kathleen Walker** is the missioner for Black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She joined the bishop’s staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Fla., as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.*