

## God is not with “me”

The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus saying: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” These words are comforting, they are a source of strength and many have remembered these exact words in difficult periods in their lives, even at the point of death. These words are powerful as well as true of our experience of God with us, of Immanuel.

As I sat with these words in preparation for today’s sermon I wasn’t finding much comfort in them. Instead I was finding myself wrestling with them, shaken by them. The question that kept ringing in my mind was this: “Am I to take these words as an endorsement of all that I am doing and all that I stand for?” Is Jesus with me? With us? If Jesus is with “us” who is “us”?

As I sat with these questions and looked at the world around me: protests in city streets throughout this nation in response to the killing of George Floyd preceded by the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and the horrifyingly long list of those in this country’s history who have lost their lives because of the color of their skin; Anger over the actions of a president clearing away peaceful protests with tear gas and rubber bullets to pose in front of a church; I thought to myself: many of those that have committed such acts have read this passage as an endorsement of their actions. If God is with us, if Jesus is with us, who can be against us?

But it’s not as simple as drawing lines in the sand.

Today is Trinity Sunday so I feel an obligation to say something directly to that, something that I hope will not be tangential but the foundation of everything that I am going to say and pray here with you today. What is so meaningful about the Trinity is not what the great Church Father’s and theologians after them have said or the councils of the church have agreed the Trinity is; No. What is so meaningful is what prompted those people to sit down and figure it out in the first place.

Paul in his letter today expresses a Trinitarian understanding of God: Jesus, God, Holy Spirit. Now Paul is not thinking, how can this be, 3 persons one God? No Paul is speaking of his and others experience of God in their day to day lives. As a God who is understood in relationships, not a God that is understood a part from them. For those living in the world at the time of Jesus and Paul they were not reading scripture in order to “understand” God, they were going to scripture to make sense of their experience of God. This God that they encountered in the world around them, they encountered this God through Jesus, the son of God, and then also through God’s Holy Spirit. They encountered this God through one another, in community together, in experiences and relationships with people outside that community. Scripture does not tell us about a time that God *was* all around. Scripture tells us about a God that *is* all around, yesterday, today, and in the future: It is still the case that we encounter God out in the world. This is the expression of an incarnate faith. God can be touched, God can be seen, God can reach out and touch us. This is our faith.

The doctrine of the trinity tells us that God is always doing something new in the world. Paul, too, understood this. Paul tells us that when someone is baptized in the name of Jesus there is a

new creation. When they are baptized in the name of the father, son, and holy spirit, there is a new creation.

The hard part about this though, and this is the part that we are less comfortable with, that I was less comfortable with as I reflected on this sermon: If God is a God we encounter out there, then God is a God that we encounter over there. God is not endorsing my cause or your cause, God is just with us, showing us, imploring us to listen to God and to one another, imploring us to hear that love is possible; that love will always be possible. That that new thing God is creating in the world is love.

When I or we assume God is with us alone and our moral landscape is superior to another's; we have to ask ourselves, is there room for love here? Love becomes harder to realize when we are angry or filled with rage. That is not the God we encounter in scripture. The God we encounter there is a God who tells the religious order of the day they have it all wrong. Who tells us that those with great wealth and power are concerned with the wrong things. The God we encounter there is a God who tells us to love our enemies, who tells us that Justice is God's alone, who tells us that God is most often encountered on the other side of the lines we have drawn, who's encountered when we remove everything in our lives that is not love.

It sounds so simple: to love our brothers and sisters; to love those that are different than us. Martin Luther King Jr. said that love is overthrowing everything, big and small, that is not love. This is not some warm puppy dog kind of love, this isn't Hallmark. This is the love that marriages are made of, that love that demands work, that love that demands our vulnerability, that love that takes all we have to give so we can say with our words and actions this is what makes me better, this is what makes us better. A love that does not walk away from disagreements but a love that instead wants to understand wants to provide strength to another and not merely be strengthened. A love that can tell us we are wrong and love that can hear the other telling us to listen. This is the love that drives out hate, this is the love that overthrows everything that is not love and it is a love that demands our full attention. Love is possible here.

Yet we are at a time in our nation where we are so very polarized. We are at a time where we cannot imagine the other side being right, only that they are wrong. We are at a time where many of us are seeing what we have been slow to see, that divisions such as race shape our lives in painful tragic ways, that our ideologies of conservatism, liberalism, and individualism keep us separated, isolated from one another. Some of us cannot hear the pain and suffering of God's children in the voices of those who shout "Black Lives Matter", others cannot hear the fear of God's children in those who shout "Make America Great Again" or the fear in God's children who shout "Make America Sane again". Too often we do not imagine that God could be with those we disagree with. I have wondered at times in recent years "Where is God?" These words from Matthew today "I am with you always" remind us that God is here now and tomorrow. These words remind us that the way forward is a love that heals another's pain, a love that removes another's fear. Guilt, shame, anger, these are not of love; these tell us that this is not how it is supposed to be. God who is encountered all around us in the every day, who makes a way where there is no way, this is love; God's new creation is what must be and will be. It will not be easy but it will always be possible, maybe not in our lifetimes, but we keep building the foundations, we can keep proclaiming the love of God and of God's son.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus is with us. God is with us. God's animating breath is animating creation making something new; God is always creating. God's Spirit is always moving among us inviting us, imploring us to hear the need for our ongoing work in this new creation through those who say "I can't breathe." I have hard, intentional work to do within myself. I have work I need to invite God to do within me. But like me the Church is being called to do something new. The Church is being asked to do this work too. To name those things that divide us, to talk in love with one another about them, to move beyond the boundaries we've drawn for ourselves.

The sides we've drawn are not new; they are of our own making and belong in that category of sin and death; not new creation, not eternal life. God cries out from all of us and all of creation because God is among us. waiting to be encountered, waiting to be seen by us, waiting for us to admit that love is possible here all the while working to make love the reality. As for me, It is time I find the courage and strength to listen, to recognize God in the other and experience new wonders of God's creation there, Sisters and brothers, God is here; will you join me as I step over these lines we've drawn to proclaim "Love is possible here." Amen.