

June 14, 2020
The Second Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 6—Year A
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Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

“Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion.”¹
Amen.

That was our Collect of the Day for today. If we were in the church sanctuary, the furniture and I would be wearing vestments, and we'd be dressed in green. On the liturgical calendar, this is the first “green” Sunday, and we're on the long stretch of “ordinary” time. That means we've had the more specialized seasons of Advent, Christmas, the season after Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Through all that, we learned all about God's redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. Knowing all that, it's time to get to work.

To get us started, the Gospel reading last week was the “Great Commission”—the last sentences of the Gospel of Matthew. The risen Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”²

Today for our Gospel reading we backed up to Jesus' *first* sending of the disciples, when they still numbered *twelve*. Jesus, having gotten down to business, “went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.”³ Jesus has started to build the Kingdom that he proclaims, and he has called those disciples to help. He has called us, too. Throughout the long green season, Jesus uses words and actions to teach them and us what to do.

On Thursday I spent most of the day attending a diocesan Clergy Day. The bishops host these “mandatory” events about once a quarter. Like everything else, they've changed with the pandemic: this one took place via Zoom. In the portion of the day that usually features a training or presentation, this edition brought small group conversation in virtual breakout rooms. As you might expect, our topics were *COVID-19* and *racism*. Bishop Ian divided the participants into groups of five, and we had two sessions. Overall, the conversation was good, and I appreciated my conversation partners. But the second set of prompts for conversation rubbed me the wrong way. I'm not even quite sure why. These are the two questions we were asked to discuss:

- What are we learning about God, about the church, and about ourselves in these difficult times?
- What is God saying and what are we called to do as clergy leaders at this time?

Looking back, these questions are just fine. We could probably use them right now as the starting point for a pretty great group conversation. On Thursday, though, what I heard in those questions was our general Christian tendency to spiritualize the troubles that come our way. At least in part because of Paul's Letter to the Romans, part of which we heard today, Christian tradition has often separated the physical from the spiritual. When they are separated, only the spiritual is considered "good," while the physical is always at least a little bit suspect. The thing is, as we heard last week, the God of Genesis calls *creation* "good." Nonetheless, Christians as a whole often seem to have a hard time taking responsibility for the physical reality right in front of them: instead, we say that God, working in mysterious ways, will take care of it, in "the sweet by and by."

Of course, if the *life* of Jesus is any indication, what really matters *is* what's in front of us. And if Christians ignore *that*, we might also place at least a little blame on the Nicene Creed. Let me explain why. We say the Nicene Creed every Sunday; we'll say it right after I finish this sermon. We use it in worship because its recitation is specified without option "On Sundays and other major Feasts."⁴ That quote is from *The Book of Common Prayer*, which has canonical authority: I'm not supposed to deviate from that in the worship that I am in charge of. Despite that, my own relationship with the Nicene Creed is troubled. It's troubled less because of what is said, and more because of what is not said.

The Nicene Creed has been part of the Christian tradition since the fourth century. It took two fourth-century church councils to get it to its current form. The first, in the year 325, was called by the Roman Emperor Constantine. He was the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. This no doubt made life easier for Christians and led to phenomenal church growth: Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians and legalized the practice of Christianity. But this was not without cost: there began Christianity's long flirtation with political and economic power. It has been a temptation that the church has proved unable to resist.

Constantine's conversion story alone might give us pause. Accounts differ, but it goes basically like this: in a dream or a vision he saw something resembling the Christian Chi-Rho symbol. He heard the message that using that symbol in battle would bring victory, so he had it placed on his soldiers' shields. And they did have victory. Then there's the story about Constantine's mother finding the "true cross" upon which Jesus was crucified. She sent him the nails, and he had them melted down into a bit for his warhorse. It's hard to imagine that Jesus would approve of any of this. Was Constantine a devoted Christian, a political opportunist, or both? That's a question we might still ask about our national leaders.

Constantine convened the Council of Nicea because church leaders were fighting. He wanted Christianity to unify his empire, so Christianity itself needed to be unified. He called the bishops together and told them they weren't leaving until they figured it out, and so they did. A second council brought the Nicene Creed to its final form and established the basic Christian orthodoxy that remains in place today. The arguments settled by the Nicene Creed had to do with the nature of Jesus Christ, so Jesus gets the most attention. It also briefly covers Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection. But there's a big gap: it says nothing about Jesus' active ministry. The great bulk of the four Gospels concerns Jesus' active ministry, but that's left out of the Nicene Creed entirely.

This deficit has been considered by theologians way more qualified than I am. One recent book looks there for the Christian lack of concern for the natural environment. We might look there for a whole host of ways that Christians have fallen short in building the Kingdom of God. We simply can't leave peace and justice to "the sweet by and by." Instead, like Jesus, we must fully, physically occupy our time and place, building the Kingdom when we are and where we are.

Rather than a time for white Christian nationalistic triumphalism, this should be a time of white Christian humility. Today at Varick Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in New Haven there will be a prayer service followed by a march to the New Haven Green. In my Thursday Clergy Day breakout group, I said to my conversation partners that all the white Christian clergy should probably go the entire mile-long route on our knees. Did you know that slaves were sold on the New Haven Green until the year 1825? I didn't, until a couple of weeks ago. Did you know that the oldest Episcopal Church building in Connecticut was built in part with slave labor? I learned that just last year.

The Episcopal Church has long let itself be entwined with power and wealth. White Christianity has long been complicit in the sin of racism around the globe. White Christians must acknowledge that history and correct its errors. Maybe the will to do so is developing. Yesterday I read articles by leaders in the Episcopal Church calling for serious reconciliation and restoration, both within the Church and more broadly. It's the right thing to do. It's the Christian thing to do. And the truth is, we will *all* be better off for it.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."⁵ The garden isn't yet ready for harvest, but there is plenty for us to do. We are living in uncertain days, and it's very clear that our long green season will be different this year. We pray something new is growing.

"Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion."⁶ Amen.

Notes

¹ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 230.

² Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV.

³ Matthew 9:35, NRSV.

⁴ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 358.

⁵ Matthew 9:37-38, NRSV.

⁶ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 230.