

Pentecost + June 4, 2017

“Now make sure you make them feel welcome and make sure they get a good sending. Welcome them warmly and send them off in style.”

Such was the advice of the person in the contextual education office at Luther seminary some months ago. A bunch of us intern supervisors were on a conference call and I don't remember much from that conversation but I do remember that piece of advice. I trust that today we are sending our Vicar off in good style both at worship and in the reception between services.

Today is Katherine's last day with us. Tomorrow she begins Clinical Pastoral Education and the next leg in her adventure of preparing to be a pastor in the church. Katherine, we don't want you to go. Your time with us has been too short. Yet, we trust that you are responding to God's call and so we send you with our prayers that God will be your support and companion and guide.

Today Katherine is sent. Others today are begin sent as well.

In a few moments, our soon-to-be graduating High School seniors will be quilted. It's a beautiful tradition. It is a sending of sorts. Many of these sisters and brothers are off to college. Some off to other adventures. The quilt marks the milestone of graduation and the next chapter in their journey of faith and life. Garret, Johanna, Rachel, Jonny, Katy, and Fiona: keep these quilts as signs of God's grace. Let them tell you that you are wrapped in God's love. Always.

And there is yet one more sending. The Rite of Affirmation of Vocation for those who were baptized or said “yes” to their baptism at Easter. Today they say publicly that they want to use their gifts in daily life to honor God and follow Jesus. After several months in the WAY process, this Rite send you forth into a new sense of what it means to live out your baptism.

Now, don't get any ideas ... those being sent today are not leaving the church. Quite the contrary. Those affirming vocations are, in fact, stepping into a close relationship with PRLC. Our High School Seniors know that this is their congregation, and wherever they land we trust they will find a worshipping community. Katherine has been called to a life of service in the church.

These sending rituals are not about leaving. They are about being commissioned.

These sending blessing are done by God and our sisters and brothers sent today are being sent into new and fresh chapters in their journeys.

In a very real sense, all today are being sent. Every Sunday we are sent.

Do you notice how the final movement in the liturgy is called the Sending? God sends us forth into the world Sunday after Sunday, week after week and with the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit imprinted on our hearts and with the charge to “Go in Peace and Serve the Lord” resounding in our ears we are sent by God to be God’s presence in the world of the neighbor.

- What does it mean to be sent?
- What does it look like?
- What difference does it make?
- What is so darned unique about living as God’s people in the world or living as disciples of Christ?
- Sent to what and to do what?
- To whom are we sent?

Consider the Gospel for today. It is a sending story.

On this last day of Easter, we get to revisit a piece of the great story we heard on the Second Sunday of Easter. It is evening of the day in which Jesus was raised. Somehow he gets behind locked doors where the disciples are huddle in fear. He shows them his hands and side. The marks of the nail wounds. He greets them with peace and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Then, comes the Pentecost moment. Jesus breathes on them. “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Disciples are sent in to the world with nothing less than the power of God’s Spirit breathed upon them. And notice the peculiar nature of his power breathed upon us. It is the power to forgive.

Jesus says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Quite a power to exercise in a world saturated with violence.

Violence has a creed. Violence is a power that operates with a belief system and the belief is that somehow violence redeems violence. We seek to destroy the enemy. We want to do violence to the one who has done violence to us, but all that does it perpetuate the vicious cycle of violence. Doesn’t change a thing. You see, Jesus’ response to hatred run amok is radical mercy and forgiveness becomes the means of peace. Forgiveness makes a way into the future. Forgiveness becomes the new path on which we tread and find life and reconciliation and redemption. This is how persons and communities and nations are restored.

And we are practitioners of this holy way. This new way. We are sent. We are sent into the world to exercise this power breathed upon us by the Risen Jesus.

Notice how this power unfolds in today's Gospel. When Jesus arrives in the room he does not announce plans to get even with those who executed him. Nor does he scold the disciples for being complicit in the execution by their betrayal or denial or abandonment of him.

Instead, Jesus greets them with "peace." He sends them into the world not to condemn others or judge others or manifest some sort of smarmy religious self-righteousness. These are all postures borne of violence. Jesus sends them with power to practice God's love. To be agents of forgiveness in a world that knows little to nothing of the subject. Forgive. Forgive and forgiveness takes place, but ... if you "retain the sins of any they are retained."

Well, what does that mean?

Look at it this way – retaining someone's sin happens when we, that is you or I, refuse to forgive. God isn't retaining. We are. In refusing to forgive another we are not trusting in God's power to reconcile or heal or make new. We turn our back on the power Jesus has breathed upon us. To retain is to "hold fast" to how that person has offended us or hurt us. What is gained in all of this? Nothing except our sense of being right or superior. The business of forgiveness, to be sure, is complicated and takes time, but the flat our refusal of it is a rejection of another and signals a loss of trust in God's work of love and our call to love.

Our job isn't to condemn or judge other sinners like us. That's just the same old, same old and it doesn't change a thing. God forgives and forgets. By choosing to retain we turn our backs on God's reconciling work.

Do you see how this Pentecost power, so life-giving and so life-changing, is a peculiar power in the conventional ways we order the world?

Pay attention, though. Notice where it happens. Notice where God's mysterious works of love unfolds or where folks bear witness to it.

You likely heard about the horrific act of violence in Portland a week or so ago. It occurred in the light rail train. One of the passengers was yelling anti-Muslim slurs at two teenage girls. Three other passengers tried to calm him down and tried to quell his tirade which was, by all accounts, very frightening. He attacked these three men. He stabbed them and two of them were killed.

One of them, as he lay bleeding from the stab wound to his neck, uttered these parting words: “Tell everyone on the train that I love them.”

Tell everyone on the train I love them.

Everyone on the train – the two girls, the two fellows who joined him in protecting the girls, the bystanders and observers, and I suspect the man who stabbed him. I hear an echo of Jesus’ words on the Cross as he was bleeding and dying: “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

As an echo of Jesus’ words from the cross, I suspect everyone on the train means everyone.

Jesu sends us into the world endowed with this sort of power.

God knows it isn’t a power I can muster or you can muster, but it is breathed upon us and it is Jesus, crucified and risen, who breathes his spirit on us.

- Katherine, you are sent into the world to be a practitioner of this power.
- Dear Seniors about to graduate: you are sent into the world as practitioners of this power.
- New members of PRLC – you are sent into the world as practitioners of this power.
- Everyone us gathered here is sent into the world be practitioners of his power.

On this great day of Pentecost, we celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit, the power that reaches beyond barriers and transcends nations, the power that keeps the church as one and prizes differences and does not demean them. The power let loose in the world demonstrating mercy and God’s gift of forgiveness.

God gathers us in and sends us out. Again, and again. Jesus breathes upon us the power that is from God. We are endowed with the power of Pentecost. Use it well. Amen.