

"Tell of God's Work"

Scripture Passages: 1) Matthew 3:1-3, 11-12
2) Matthew 11:2-19

Taking the Pulse: Up to this point in his Gospel account Matthew has shared Jesus' great sermon with us. He has shared a diverse collection of Jesus' healing stories. He has shared Jesus call to the disciples to go out into the world. Matthew has made a strong presentation of Jesus' identity, Jesus' ministry, and Jesus' call for us to be followers of the Jesus' Way.

Matthew decided this was a good point in his telling of the Gospel story to check in with people. Matthew thought it would be a good moment to ask people, "So what do you think? What do you think of Jesus? Are you ready to be a Jesus follower?"

Matthew was a pastor for a group of people, just as Hilary and I are pastors here. Matthew had been working with his congregation, trying to help them fall in love with the Jesus' Way, the Way of our Triune God.

Pentecost, the day the church celebrates its birthday seems like a great day for us too, to ask ourselves, "What do I believe? What do I believe about Jesus? What do I believe about being a follower of Jesus? What do we believe about being Christ's people?"

Matthew believed it was important for all of us to do an assessment of our faith. Matthew believed it was important for us to have an awareness of where we are in our God relationship. That is what we want to ponder today.

Jim's Challenge: When we consider our faith journey, each of us can point to different watershed moments, moments that redirected the trajectory of our faith journey.

One of those moments for me was during the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. My high school pastor, his name is Jim Hancock, challenged me to start a prayer group at my high school. I thought he was insane. I can still picture the shocked, bewildered, "you have got to be kidding me" look on my face when he made that suggestion.

I went to General William Mitchell High School, back then on the east side of Colorado Springs. When I started attending there my class had over 700 people. Through the 70's and early 80's Mitchell was a 5A school, regularly ranked in the state in Football and Basketball. I think Mitchell is a 3A school now.

Mitchell was defined by clichés. You could stand at the top of the stairs looking down into the cafeteria and easily name all the different clichés, as you scanned the room. I didn't fit into any of the clichés. I played tennis and soccer, but I definitely didn't fit with the jocks. I was in some AP classes, but I didn't really fit with the academic folks. In junior high I had been involved in choir, but not anymore, so I didn't fit with the choir people. I was an outsider at my school.

I went home from that meeting with Jim and I put myself at the top of those stairs looking down upon that sea of clichés in the cafeteria and imagined what might happen to me if I started a prayer group at the school. As I looked out over that sea of my peers, I thought to myself, "No way, it would be suicide, at least for my meager status in that place, if not for my actual physical well-being. I put the idea out of my mind.

Well, I tried to put the idea out of my mind, but it just kept returning. The first day of school, I went and talked to one of the teachers who I had actually never had, but I knew was a Christian.

I asked him if I might be able to borrow his classroom, once a week before school. I was horrified when he said yes.

The next day I found Jamie. He was another guy that didn't fit in. I didn't really know him, but I was pretty sure he was a person who took his faith seriously. Later I would learn his family was Mennonite/Amish in background and practice. I asked him, if he wanted to get together once a week to pray. I was horrified when he too said, "yes".

The next week, I dragged my sister because I drove her to school, and what else did she have to do that early in the morning. Sure enough Jaime showed up too. The three of us prayed. We never missed a week the rest of the school year. By the end of the year there were 15 of us praying weekly.

I will probably revisit that story with you now and then because on a number of levels it was such a pivotal story for my faith journey. For today, I simply want to say: "That time of wrestling with whether to start a prayer group, was a time of growing in awareness of what I believed, and how I was going to live out what I believed."

Pentecost is a great day for us to be aware of what we believe and why? We are at a point in Matthew's Gospel where he is challenging us to be aware of what we believe and why we believe it?

John's Doubt: Matthew hoped to stimulate our growing awareness about what we believe by having John the Baptist ask the question we all have on our hearts and minds, at least from time to time. John sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

What a great Pentecost question: "Jesus are you the One we've been expecting or are we still waiting?"

We began our service reading the passage from Matthew chapter 3 where John the Baptist was announcing and introducing Jesus to the World as the Messiah. John proclaimed, "The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

Wow, how our faith changes from moment to moment! John the Baptist went from making bold statements about the identity of Jesus, to asking Jesus: "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

John had gone from living in the desert with huge crowds coming out to hear him preach, to being imprisoned, probably soon to be executed. John went from a place of bold belief to overwhelming doubt.

It is so important that this story is included in the Gospels because for most of us this story reflects our story. Most of us experience ups and downs in our surety of faith. Sometimes we have deep faith in God. While others days we are filled with doubt. John went from surety in Jesus' identity as the Messiah, to asking: "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

Often we think of doubt as the enemy of faith, but doubt is not the enemy of faith. Fear is the enemy of faith. Doubt is a normal part of the journey. Doubt weaves its way through our lives with varying intensity. John was in an intense moment of questioning.

When have those moments occurred for you? What was going on in your life? Are you in such a moment of doubt right now?

We all have a lot going on. We may very well be wondering where is God in all of this?

Where is God in the midst of a pandemic? Where is God when the disparity between rich and poor is broadening rapidly? Where is God when 350,000 people have died from a virus? Where is God when so many people are unable to work? Where is God in the midst of our fractured society? Where is God when someone from our community disappears? Where is God when a person of color is killed by police officers?

Like John experienced doubt is a normal part of life's journey.

Jesus responded to John's question by saying: "Go back and tell John what's going on: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side."

Jesus told John's disciples, John's friends to encourage him with how they were experiencing God at work, experiencing God's faithfulness. This is one of the reasons community is absolutely essential, so that we can encourage one another during our times of doubt. And we encourage one another by sharing all the ways we are seeing God at work in the world and in our lives. In the midst of this pandemic how are you seeing God at work? How are you experiencing God's faithfulness?

One of the astounding experiences we are having at the church is the outpouring of financial support for the Food Pantry and the Love Fund from both folks connected to First Pres. and also tremendous support from the Community at large, both individuals and businesses. It truly has been amazing.

Jesus encourages us to share with one another, all of the beautiful ways we experience God's faithfulness because as we share we no doubt speak life into someone weighed down by doubt.

"Jesus told them, 'Go back and tell John what's going on: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.'"

God is on Your Side: In describing God's faithfulness, Matthew began talking about the miracles then ended with: "The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side." Isn't that beautiful! When we learn God is on our side, our doubt begins to melt away. Jesus then exemplified this very aspect of God's nature.

Did you catch the beautiful act of Jesus, as soon as John's disciples went to report back to him? Immediately, Jesus began to tell the crowd about the amazing person of John the Baptist. Jesus said to the crowd, "No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer."

When John was filled with doubt, Jesus called him a person for whom no one in all of history would ever surpass. God is truly on our side, even, and perhaps especially in the midst of our doubt. In the midst of our doubt God stands up for us. God is on our side. God is on your side, even when you aren't sure you believe in God. God is on your side. That is great news.

Conclusion: Here in the middle of his Gospel, Matthew took a moment to encourage his congregation and now each of us to take some time, and ask ourselves, "Who is Jesus? And will we choose to follow the Jesus Way?"

Matthew opened the door for that question by sharing the story of John the Baptist's doubt, and Jesus' beautiful, healing response. John the Baptist was soon going to know without a doubt that God was on his side.

As we learn to share with each other how we are experiencing God's faithfulness, we help each other move beyond doubt. We help each other know, without a doubt, that God is on our side. Amen.