

2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.12.15
Scripture: John 20:19-31

We're about to accept into membership of this congregation several new people, eight, maybe nine. Given that we currently have twelve formal members, this is a seismic jump—and we're making headlines for it. The Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ is featuring us in its email weekly blast called “Spotlight” and in its slightly-longer-form blog.

But think about it for a moment, what this means, to be a member: it's a good question. I suppose it's a good question in any congregational context, but it's an especially good one here because (as I understand it) people very quickly feel a part of things among us, or they don't. Without any formalism, beyond any formal mechanism for joining, free of any fetters that might come with institutionalism and its attendant committee structure and resultant Robert's Rules of Order, this congregation has a mysterious way of enfolded into involvement and active participation new “members” all the time, really on any given Sunday. If some congregations thrive on planning and budgeting; or on envisioning, implementation, and evaluation; we thrive on seeing how it goes and taking it from here.

Not surprisingly, this fits my leadership style, which I explained for the forthcoming blog post. Leadership is often something done from out front: a leader has a vision and then comes up with a plan and then guides a process so to realize the vision. Bigger organizations need such leadership, I imagine. Gould Farm, for example, (I imagine) needs someone out front charting the course and deciding on how to stay it. But another sort of leadership is more responsive, more done from beside and behind. I've found this is how I lead, and it seems to me this is the sort that small congregations tend to need.

Incidentally, this also fits with my experience of God. For some, God is felt to have a plan—and this makes sense. After all, one of the persistent claims of the faith is eschatological, that which concerns the end. God has in mind an end of all things, a glorious end in which all is praise, a consummation of the creation and creator. So it must be that God guides all things to that end, and this could be felt as God's plan. But for me, I experience God less as “having a plan” and more as acting in response—responding to what unfolds, responding even to me in forgiveness and grace. I act: God responds. We act: God responds.

Did you know, *-spond* is the Latin root meaning promise? So to re-*spond* is to renew an already-established promise. There's theological truth in this, then, that God, the one of ancient

promises, is also fundamentally responsive, ever renewing those ancient promises. There's also, then, and imperative in this, a claim on us if we mean to be God's people: we're to be responsive. We're to respond to changing circumstances and new developments in hope. We're to respond to needs as they arise in faith. We're to respond, and always in love.

But it strikes me that this micro-dynamic way of being together doesn't rely so much on "membership." Really, membership, in the context of a responsive community, might feel like an un-necessity or even a stumbling block.

This is why, currently, many congregations are struggling mightily to give up their old membership model and mindset in favor of something more current—a discipleship model or stakeholder model. The church shouldn't be about making members but about forming disciples. The church shouldn't be about joining, as if it were a club; it should be about sending out, as if it had a mission or were itself a mission.

As it happens, I've read those books and I've attended those conferences; and I always do so as one who's already made that shift, as one serving a congregation that's already come out from under the heavy burden of membership and committees and Robert's Rules of Order, and is now burdened but lightly with freedom in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who doesn't stay still for long.

So why, then, would I celebrate as we take in new members today? Why should any of us seek to join, or rejoice that so many are joining, if we mean not to be a club of conformity but to be a mission on the move?

If you're comfortable with those questions, then you're likely uncomfortable with what appears to be John's aim with his gospel narrative. We've heard from John a lot in recent weeks, so we've heard a lot John's insistence that his hearers and readers believe in Jesus. And yet we've fallen far short of hearing many instances of his insistence. In fact, over 50 times in the 20 chapters of this gospel comes in several forms this refrain: "...so that all might believe through him," "Do you not believe?" "Do you now believe?" "Tell me that I may believe," "We have come to believe," "Lord, I believe," and, as we heard earlier, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Really, by this insistence John justifies having written his whole gospel: "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Maybe you didn't notice all the insistence on believing, though, because so much else is going on here as well.

First, there's this—the disciples locked away in fear of the Jews.

This, though, is more usefully heard as their being locked away simply for fear. They were—these disciples, after all, we must remember—Jews themselves; and there was nothing, and *is* nothing, inherently frightening about Jews (or about any other brand of human group). What *is* frightening, however, is violence let loose: violence now without proper framing or structure or reason or aim. I mean, violence with those attendant fetters is frightening enough. The violence of the electric chair or the firing squad is frightening enough, but at least its controlled and somewhat predictable and reasonable. The violence of war is fearsome enough, but at least there's such a thing as “war crimes” which mean to give war structure and a sense of fair play, if a perverse one. (One of the many things that's so disturbing about the recent police shootings, racially charged and caught on tape, is that it's violence approaching the out of bounds. And once we can't trust the police to use violence “correctly,” then we're in a new sort of danger.)

After all, violence let loose is another matter. And violence, this week, this “Holy Week,” had (perhaps?) been let loose. The state working with the priesthood had killed an innocent man, and now his followers were scattered and doing God knows what, proclaiming and planning God knows what. So the fears were real, and likely all around. Among the authorities, would the followers of this Jesus retaliate for all this? Among the followers of Jesus, would the authorities seek to kill off still more of their movement, come after each of them, one by one? And so would any among the disciples break out of their discipline of peaceful resistance and strike back themselves?

Second, there's this: Jesus come and standing among them and breathing on them the breath that is the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete* as it's called in this gospel. Strictly speaking, *paraclete* means “called to one's side,” and so is often translated into English as “comforter” or “advocate.” Think of a public defender or a health care proxy. Think of someone trained and skilled in a field where you're stuck in mire and unable to fend for yourself. But then consider this, which this Holy Spirit enables the disciples to do: if now they forgive the sins of any, those sins are forgiven; but if they retain the sins of any, those sins are retained.

This has been heard as the founding scripture for the Christian priesthood, which came to be felt as having the power to forgive and redeem, or not as the case may be. But what if this passage weren't saying anything so general as all that? What if this detail were most relevant in the context of what's going on here, in the story, on that very scary night?

Violence was let loose and on the move. And it was either going to keep lashing out and keep claiming more victims, or someone was going to have to stop it—and by deciding, though,

they had the “right” to retaliate, instead not to retaliate. And in this way, either the sin of the other would be retained and so the acts of retaliation would continue—until everyone everywhere was engulfed in violence; or the sin of the other would be forgiven and so the whole downwardly spiraling dynamic of violence-begetting-violence would be put to rest. This is to say that Jesus, resurrected and returned now in peace, could simply be saying to his friends on this terrifying night, “The choice is yours: forgive and have forgiveness reign, or retain and continue in the path of resentment and violence. The choice is yours.”

Third, there’s this: Thomas, poor Thomas, whom we condemn as “doubting,” but who I think was simply deeply unfortunate. I mean, he was out when all the other disciples received visitation from the Risen Christ—and who knows why he was out? Maybe he was out gathering supplies for their lengthening stay behind those locked doors. Maybe he was out getting a sense of things—“doing recon,” as it were, to gauge how much longer they’d need to stay locked away, to determine whether it was safe at last to come out. Whatever. The point is that he was out; and then he came back and everyone told him, “We have seen the Lord! (Oh, but you were out.)”

And we blame him for “doubting.” Traditionally, the church has condemned him as “doubting.” Jesus, however, didn’t. He simply granted Thomas his request: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,” Thomas said, “and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” So, the following week, Jesus simply returned and said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.”

Of course, the reason we might condemn Thomas for doubting is because that puts us in company with the “blessed.” To do so puts us in the company of those whom Jesus considers blessed, praises as blessed: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

So, now we’ve come to it—for by this word of blessings from Jesus, our writer “John” wraps into his story those who come after, his hearers and readers, we who have not seen and yet might believe.

Now we’ve come to it, John’s need for us to believe.

You know what word isn’t in our litany for joining the church? “Believe.” We’ve got “desire,” “seek,” and “hope.” We’ve got “promise,” “welcome,” and “affirm.” But we have no “believe.”

This is by design. People didn’t, and don’t, want to have to claim to believe something, especially if they don’t believe in—not this time with new members, or any prior time in my

memory. We're a serious bunch, it seems: we take our words and confessions seriously enough not to want to say something we can't stand with.

And we're not alone, here in Monterey. The whole UCC is a non-creedal denomination: we have no common creed that we've established as the thing that makes the difference between those who are members and those who aren't.

What's more, this is usually felt as one of its selling points: no creeds! After all, the Christian faith, as perceived and as practiced, has been largely reduced to a set of assertions that you either believe in (and so are Christian) or don't believe in (and so aren't). (Six days to create the world? Yes? You're a Christian! Premarital sex? No? You're a Christian!) I don't suppose any here would celebrate this as a wonderful development in the lived faith.

But remember, "creed" comes from *credo*, as in, "I believe," as in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth; and of Jesus Christ, His Only Son, our Lord..." And, though few here, it seems, want to say, "I believe..." it's worthy to recognize what exactly John is committed to having us believe.

That Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is the abiding presence of God and the full revelation of God in the world: this is what John needs us to believe. And why? Because people will say all sorts of things are true about God that aren't true: that God hates fags (untrue, if "fag" is taken to mean gays and lesbians); that God blesses slavery (untrue); that God rewards with blessing the especially deserving (untrue); that God punishes with suffering those who deserve it (untrue). This sure knowledge that people will say all sorts of things about God that aren't true is what justified the priesthood and established church in the first place: we needed an authority to which to resort when people attempted to assert as true things about God that are untrue. But that presupposed the un-corruption of the church and the priesthood, which is unfortunately a presupposition that came no longer to hold.

And so came the Protestants, who widened the circle of those with authority—widened it so wide that now everyone has a say. Everyone has his or her truth that is as valid as everyone else's truth. And so God is said to work in all sorts of ways that may or may not comport with what's true. God gave Tim Tebow victory because he prayed in public. God gave Joel Osteen wealth because he prayed for wealth in just the right way. God gave America the biggest military because we're an exceptional nation in God's sight but God condemned America with defeat in Iraq because we've legalized abortion.

No.

No.

And how do I know this? Because the cross.

Because the cross, this I know: God is cruciform. God is self-giving, self-emptying. God is wounded and killed that we might have peace. The cross is the standard by which we measure assertions about what God is and what God is not, about what God has done and what God has not done.

A standard: an objective and agreed upon measurement that is true and checked for being true by an established disinterested authority: when you go to the gas station you don't have to wonder whether the gallon you're buying is actually a gallon. It says right there on the pump: it's been checked and authorized by the Department of Weights and Measures.

John means for his gospel assertion about Jesus, and him crucified, to be such a department of theological weights and measures; and John understands the cross as the true measure of God, the true revelation of God's nature, way, and end. God is cruciform. God is self-giving, self-emptying. God is wounded and killed that we might have peace. This is what John is so desperate to have us believe. This is what Thomas had confirmed when he wanted to see, not just Jesus, but his wounds, his *mortal* wounds.

And why? Why the urgency around this theological claim? Why the persistence in regard to a claim that really seems quite abstract? (Angels on the head of a pin.) Because by this the world will be saved—saved, that is, from itself. By self-giving, by *forgiving*, by self-emptying and giving way to the other, by striving not for survival and self-preservation, but for eternal and abundant life for all starting now: by these things peace will be won and salvation will be ours—all of ours, for “salvation” means wholeness, perfection; so anything less than salvation for all isn't salvation at all.

This is what we are meant to believe.

Do we believe it?

Do you believe it?

If you do, then we need you—we of this little church with twelve members.

The fact is that Church membership is about the less lofty matters of life together. Concerning itself with the facts-of-the-matter, the allocation of resources, the financial assets and the budget, the physical plant and the pastor's time, church membership doesn't have “its privileges,” it has its responsibilities.

And they're sometimes quite dull responsibilities—cleaning up after communion, picking up the mail, stopping in to turn down the heat when I've forgotten to but realize the fact only after I've

arrived back home in Lenox. And they're sometimes quite crucial responsibilities—seeing after the upkeep of the building, or tracking down the rent from the tenant of the parsonage, or approving my annual report and how I prioritize my duties. And they're sometimes quite spirited responsibilities—deciding on whether to refurbish the organ, or to give to Construct or the Crocus Fund (or both!), or to invest in more Godly Play stories or hymnals or a piano. Most of all, though, they're responsibilities to be entrusted with those who share in the belief that Jesus is key to what God wants us to know about Godself, who have no agenda other than to live by the law of love, and who will stand together as one risen body witnessing to what abides, that is, faith and hope and love.

You know, response isn't the only way by which ancient promises are reaffirmed. It also happens in responsibility—in taking it and entrusting it. So not only are we to be a people who respond, we're also to be a people who take responsibility and who entrust responsibility. It's leadership that's less “beside” and more “beneath” (undergirding, establishing). Membership is one way this is done.

And so we do celebrate new members among us—not as contradictory to our mission but as a needful part of it.

Thanks be to God.