

Sunday April 7, 2024

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 139: 13–14

GOSPEL READING: John 20: 19–31

Sermon Series: Becoming: Vulnerable

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

Good morning Beloved Community!

We are embarking on a 50 day journey towards Pentecost which equates to be exactly 7 Sundays between Easter (which occurred last Sunday) until Holy Pentecost which lands on May 19, 2024.

- A more straightforward way for me to identify this time of our liturgical season is to name that we are on the first Sunday after Easter/Resurrection Sunday, a time in which we are all to process the significance of the tomb being discovered empty by Mary Magdalene.
- As some of our Wednesday Night Scholars immediately identified with me as we reflected and gave feedback on the sermon that I preached last Sunday entitled

“Enduring Resurrection;” they noted to me that I did not directly talk about the physical resurrection of Jesus.

- Some of the class participants noted how I talked about resurrection mainly from a communal aspect;
- **It is a resurrection** that I named empowers the community that because of Christ’s physical resurrection from the dead, we can trust and be assured that **we too can rise from the ashes** of our transgressions, life set backs, disappointments and more—hence why we can declare that the best is yet to come!
- However, the looming question is, what does all of this mean for our eternity?
- Do we simply remain ashes to ash, dust to dust; or is there something more?
- This is the rationale for my presenting to us a 6-week sermon series entitled “**Becoming,**” that essentially invites us into a more extended exploration of examining this idea of resurrection in the here and the now and the forevermore.

- If we were to think about our gospel from last week with Mary crying at the tomb for instance, **we might recall** that Mary could not recognize that the gardener on the scene was indeed the Resurrected Jesus whose physical body she was looking for but did not seem to find.
- In the gospel from last week in John 20: 1-18, **we may even recall** that the angels on the scene did not provide us any real context clues as to whether Mary Magdalene understood the concept of this physically Resurrected Jesus and what this discovery might mean for her life.
- John 20:18 ended with Mary declaring, **“I have seen the Lord;”**
- However, I would submit that the jury may still be out for Mary and perhaps others on whether or not Mary was able to put the pieces together of what this physical sighting of Jesus really meant for her life.
- Therefore, this is what this sermon series will aim to do for us;

- **It is a series** inviting us to really unpack essentially what does it mean to see the Lord?
- My hermeneutic suspicion is that if you and I, both individually and collectively, can discern what seeing the Lord really means for our lives, then this, in effect, will help us to really see who we are.
- Furthermore, understanding the full implications of Jesus' Resurrection will allow us to embody our repeating first Lesson of Psalm Psalm 139: 13–14, which informs us that we are intentionally created by God to be wonderfully complex.
- However, the challenge of this lesson is, do we truly know this?
- **Do we truly know** how wonderful our God is and all of God's infinite possibilities?
- **Do we truly know** what our capabilities are, both individually and collectively, when we embrace this wonderful handiwork of God and recognize that we are part of that spectacular masterpiece?
- You see, if I could summarize briefly why I believe our first lesson is a good outcome for us to achieve, is

because I believe we are witnessing an individual who took the same reflective time and space to consider what it means to see the Lord.

- Now, some may interrupt me and say that the psalmist would not have encountered Jesus, because the book of Psalms is in the Old Testament in which Jesus Christ would not have physically come to the world yet.
- My response to this is you are correct, our psalmist did not see Jesus yet.
- However, forsaking all thoughts of escape, this did not stop our poet from turning his meditation to consider the unlimited power of God.
- You see, unlike the many psalms that illustrate the power of God by pointing to the creation of the universe (cf. Pss. 8 and 104, etc.), this psalm depicts the creative power of God in terms of the psalmist's own origin.
- In other words, the psalmist was convinced of one thing: **he had been made by God**—similar to one of our students on Wednesday night invited us to look at our hands in response to this lesson and see how the lines

literally looked as if someone sewed us together in a similar fashion.

- As a side note, this is why I will never understand racism or any other ism for that matter, for it is clear that we are all designed and formed in a similar fashion, with the lines in our hands and the ligaments that connect the muscles to our bones!
- However, the main point I would like to illustrate for us to consider is that I believe that **the one who understands** that they are wonderfully made by God, is the one who understands what **it means to see the face of God**;
- This is because it is in our first lesson that we find a tender expression of vulnerability, a recognition of a person's intimate connection with our Creator.
- Our first lesson is a poignant reminder that we are not alone in our existence, but rather intricately woven by the loving hands of God.
- One of the most significant challenges we may face in our journey of faith is embracing vulnerability.

- Our world often teaches us to mask our vulnerabilities, to present a facade of strength and invulnerability.
- However, the path to knowing God deeply requires us to shed these layers of pretense and to open ourselves entirely to the divine presence.
- **Hence, this is where I believe it is a fine time to introduce our gospel, familiarly known as the doubting Thomas story.**
- You see, in the past, all I could see within the story of Thomas initially was a person who had doubts that Jesus, indeed, had physically resurrected.
- Giving some biblical historical background with a description that many of us grew up understanding about this passage; historically, this passage recounts the aftermath of Jesus Christ's resurrection.
- The disciples, fearful and uncertain following the crucifixion, gathered behind locked doors for fear of persecution from the religious authorities.
- Suddenly, Jesus appears among them, despite the barriers, bearing the wounds of his crucifixion.

- He offers them peace, reassures them of his identity, and commissions them with the Holy Spirit, empowering them for their mission.
- However, there is one disciple who apparently did not receive some of this message, for he was not there yet.
- Thomas, one of the disciples, who arrives on the scene later, famously doubted the resurrection until he could physically see and touch Jesus's wounds.
- Jesus gently accommodates Thomas's doubt, inviting him to see and believe.
- It is after this encounter that Thomas confesses his faith —“My Lord and my God.” For me, this confession is similar to Mary Magdalene’s confession last week—I **have seen the Lord.**”
- However, here is where my engagement with our gospel evolves as a result of this sermon series that is inviting us to become the handiwork of God.
- For it is through Thomas that I submit we gain a real glimpse of how someone becomes vulnerable with God.
- You see, backing up just a bit, our Wednesday night class was really intrigued and somewhat perplexed

about what verse 23 had to do with our story and the concept of resurrection, for that matter which states, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

- On the surface, it seemed odd to many of our Wednesday class participants that after Jesus breathed on the disciples in verse 22 and invited them to “Receive the Holy Spirit,” immediately following this command was a lesson on forgiveness.
- At the same time, a person will note themes of promised peace being spoken upon the disciples’ lives in two instances within our story, the first instance in vs 19 “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you;”” the second instance in vs 21 “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you;” with one little caveat—**an instruction and lesson on forgiveness.**
- In other words, we as a community will not experience peace if we refuse to enter into the process of forgiveness;

- We, as a community, will not fully spiritually grow if we cannot truly forgive.
- We, as a community, will not be able to truly love if we cannot forgive.
- **Furthermore, we see through Thomas what a process of forgiveness looks like— it begins with the ability to become vulnerable.**
- For I submit, **we are witnessing** someone brave and vulnerable enough to step close to Christ and really look at the wounds of hatred, envy, and fear that were pierced through Jesus' hands.
- **We are witnessing** someone who is willing to become vulnerable and touch the sides of Jesus's torso **and witness** the blows and attacks that he received in the name of setting the captives free.
- We live in a world that teaches us not to acknowledge the role we play and the wounds we tend to inflict.
- **There are historical wounds** we have inflicted where many countries have histories of colonialism, slavery, and systemic discrimination against marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

- **There are societal wounds** we have inflicted reparations or other forms of restitution to address the economic and social harms inflicted on marginalized communities due to historical injustices.
- **There are climate wounds** we have inflicted, for example, carbon emissions, particularly those from industrial activities, transportation, and energy production.
- **There are environmental wounds** we have inflicted that involve unsustainable consumption patterns and waste generation contributing to ecological degradation and climate change.
- There are wounds that are just as visible and tangible as what Thomas encountered with Jesus on that day, which Jesus invites us all to take a closer look at to this day—where in order for us to really be able to do this—it takes a measure of faith and vulnerability to do so.
- It requires us to be able to touch one another's hands and see the wounds that we bear;

- In embracing the empathy akin to Thomas, we transcend the confines of our own experiences and connect deeply with the struggles of others.
- By daring to look at the wounds of our neighbors' hands and sides, we unlock the power of compassion and solidarity.
- Through this act of seeing and understanding, we cultivate a community rooted in empathy, resilience, and mutual support.
- When we, like Thomas, courageously confront the pain and suffering of those around us, we not only acknowledge their wounds but also affirm their humanity —“My Lord and my God!” We praise you because we are fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 We know that full well.
- Let the Church say Amen!