

John Sampson
"The End Is Just the Beginning"
Text: Ezekiel 37:1 - 14
Preached at KVCC
May 20, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Today is the day of Pentecost.

It's a day of fire and Spirit.

It's a day when we are blessed with God's presence invading our lives in new and unexpected ways.

And it's on a day like this that I think about the way Tina Turner always introduces her version of the song Proud Mary.

She says, "You might like to hear something from us that's nice and easy. Well I'd like to do that for you. But there's one thing. You see we never, ever do nothing nice and easy. We always do it nice...and rough."

And it's in that spirit, because today is certainly a day for celebrating the Spirit, that I think we'll bring a little Tina Turner into our worship. Because I think you might be expecting me to say something nice and traditional. But there's one thing. You see I never, ever do theology nice and traditional. I always try to do it nice...but never traditional.

So I'm going to start out nice...and then I'm going to flip our message on it's head. Because I want us to feel the power and the life and the Spirit and the possibility of transformation that God is always offering us, no matter what.

So, here we go.

Pentecost, the event that we celebrate today, is the anniversary of the founding of the church. The traditional story goes that 50 days after Jesus was resurrected, and 9 days after Jesus had left his disciples and his friends to return to God, those same followers sat in a room in Jerusalem having no idea what was next. Their teacher was gone, they were being persecuted by their fellow countrymen, they were on the radar of the colonial powers of Rome, and things probably seemed pretty hopeless. And just then, out of the blue, came God's Spirit. It entered the room, and it entered their bodies, and it allowed them to proclaim the message of Christ in languages they didn't even know, and flames of the Spirit flickered above each one of their heads. Our tradition tells us that this event

ushered in a new chapter in the history of God's people, and set the foundation for all of the churches to come, churches just like this one we sit in this morning.

See, I can be nice.

See, I can even be traditional...if I need to be.

But now that's all over.

Because it is at a point like this that Tina breaks out, and the band turns up the amps, and the back up vocalists start doing their dance. And Tina lets it loose.

So let's follow her lead. Let's follow her Spirit!

Today at the end of Easter we don't hear the traditional story of the founding of the church read from the lectern. Instead, we hear a vision from Ezekiel who proclaims that resurrection is for all of us. Resurrection - it's not just for Jesus anymore. Sure, our teacher showed us what it would look like, he modeled it for us, but ultimately we're told it's not something that God ever thought to keep reserved only for Jesus. Her plan was always to share it with all her children.

Resurrection is for all of us!

And Ezekiel's radical vision goes further. It tells us that our resurrection isn't going to happen in heaven at some point in the distant future. It can happen right here on Earth, to our bodies, to these bodies.

And now, this very traditional morning is going to go further off the rails, because now I offer you a heresy.

A full blown, 100% certified false teaching.

And I do it because I hope it can open our eyes and help us see the deeper logic of God. I hope that it can move us beyond all of the stale and moribund doctrines that can get in the way of us recognizing the movement of God's Spirit right here, and right now.

This morning, at the end of our Easter season, at the moment when we're told we can all experience resurrection, I offer you the heresy of the Valentinians.

You see the Valentinians taught that the church got the whole story of the resurrection mixed up.

Our tradition teaches us that first there is crucifixion, and only then resurrection.

But the Valentinians said that the inverse was true. They taught that first there is the resurrection, and only then the possibility of crucifixion.

First resurrection, and then crucifixion.

But wait. That's not true you might be saying. I mean think of all of the gospels. They all tell us basically the same story. Jesus preached and ministered for years, and then was arrested and crucified. And then 3 days later God raised him from the dead. That is the tradition.

Sure. That is the tradition. But today is a new day...and I never, ever do theology nice...and traditional.

What I think is so intriguing about what the Valentinian heresy suggests is that whatever resurrection is it happened to Jesus when he was alive. And that it is a possibility for the here and now, not the here after.

I wonder if the resurrection of Jesus that the Valentinians were able to see was nothing less than the transformation of a man from his base instincts, from his selfish desires, and from his tribalism to a man who could reach out to the diseased, and the prostitutes, who could look beyond his own history, and the history of his people, and proclaim a vision of God who chases us down so that she can wrap her big divine arms around each one of us out of eternal love.

Perhaps Jesus was resurrected from being a human - to being a child of God. And perhaps his ministry and his message were the manifestations of this resurrection. Perhaps it was this transformed humanity within Jesus that ultimately led to his crucifixion, to his rejection by all of us who have not yet experienced our own resurrections into people of Love.

You see, maybe, just maybe it actually could be that first there is resurrection, and then crucifixion.

And doesn't this insight by the Valentinians open wide the vision of Ezekiel for us this morning?

Because what Ezekiel tells us today, tells us at this celebration of Pentecost, is that Jesus will not be the only one who experiences resurrection. Resurrection is the birthright of all of us. And just as Jesus was resurrected from his own base humanity, so too can we be reborn to new lives of selflessness, and compassion for each other. We too can be transformed. This is the possibility of our humanity. This is the great work of God's Spirit in our lives. This is a message of ultimate hope.

And this is a vision given to us, we who live in a dark valley, a valley of dried bones, a world that has not yet experienced full resurrection.

"I want you to find a way out. And then you run, run as fast as you can. And find a safe place."

These are the words of a mother talking to her daughter on a cell phone as her daughter hid in Santa Fe High School trying to escape the shooter who killed 10 people in the latest school shooting just two days ago.

“Your staff is speaking Spanish to customers when they should be speaking English.”
“It’s America.”

“I will be following up, and my guess is they’re not documented. So my next call is to ICE to have each one of them kicked out of my country.”

These are the words of an enraged man captured on video at a restaurant in NYC earlier this past week after he simply overheard another customer talking to one of the workers in Spanish.

All of these words are words of a world of dry bones, a world in which love and shared humanity have died. These are the words of hearts gone cold and unresponsive. These are the words of a people who so desperately cry out for resurrection – not of our bodies, not at the end of time, and not in heaven – but right here and right now.

And Jesus – the Resurrected One – the one who was reborn in his own lifetime shows us the way out of the valley of dry bones in which we are lost.

He models for us how we can love those who our nation and our history authorizes us to hate and avoid.

He shows us how to come into relationship with those who our society says are dirty and impure.

He shows us that we can experience resurrection first, and that rising into the new life of our humanity is not, is NOT, dependent upon our sacrifice, and our blood. The spilling of anyone’s blood is the result of the world’s inability to accept the beauty of the message of God’s love. It is NOT God’s requirement for sharing her love with her children.

So come – rise out of your graves. God has opened them for us. And she has given us her spirit. Rise today is the day of our resurrection!

See, I can be nice – even if my theology is a little rough!

Amen.