

A Joyful Call

Matthew 28:8-10, 16-20

June 4, 2023

Where are you? *Where are you?*

"Do not ask the question, 'Where is God?' I challenge you to hear the question that God is asking of us today: 'Where are you?'"

That very line animated—and clarified—my sense of call to become a Lake Fellow at Second Church. It is the energizing and challenging and provocative question preached by the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, on May 31, 2020, Pentecost.

I returned to Dr. Moss's question ten months later under significantly less fraught circumstances: not in the wake of George Floyd's death, a pandemic, national turmoil, or a revived moral movement for racial justice. I heard it as I pondered and prayed about Rev. Henry's invitation to become part of the staff at Second, as I walked on a creekside trail in Princeton, New Jersey.

But the challenge was the same. Hear the question that God is asking of you today: Where are you? Although I was technically on the Princeton Towpath, I heard the message clearly. "You are on the cusp of being in Indianapolis. I will be with you. I am already there. Go."

I'm glad I went.

Today in the liturgical church year, we celebrate Trinity Sunday, always the week after Pentecost. Now that all three members of the Godhead have been dramatically and explicitly revealed in Scripture, we celebrate the communion of God's Three Persons, their mission, their invitation, and charge for us to become co-leaders with God.

Trinity Sunday also marks the liturgical year's halfway point and begins the church's longest season, from now until Advent, what we call "ordinary time."

In today's Gospel reading, Matthew ends his story with Jesus ushering in a new normal time—a new ordinary time—for his disciples, a time without Jesus physically beside them, but by no means a season without Christ present among them. Jesus's promise to them is clear: Wherever you go, "I am with you *always*." That's their new normal. The new ordinary time.

Ordinary for the first disciples—and indeed for us—does not mean underwhelming. Jesus stresses this point in John. "Very truly, I tell you, you will do the works that I do, and, in fact, you will do greater works than these *because* I am going to the Father." Through Jesus's *physical* absence, Christ becomes our constant companion—ordinary people, daily, perpetually, from generation to generation, joined by our extraordinary God. With Christ at the Father's right hand, the call does not slow. It expands. The call is for all that live.

The call is *for us* to continue the call that Christ clarified for God's covenant people, old and new: To do compassionate justice, to love merciful accountability, to humbly widen communion to include peoples of all nations, baptizing and teaching, blessing and learning.

Despite our sinfulness and our frailty, our finite if vast potential, our folly, and our fickle commitments, God has invited and called us to co-labor in God's co-mission. With God's help, the ordinary yields the extraordinary.

Even in our isolation, we are not alone. Even when we doubt, we worship. Even in our folly, the Spirit of Wisdom is poured out upon us, prepared to recharge us and refine our skills of love and faithfulness, of creativity and peace, of humility and joy. Poured out to revive us at Pentecost, this Spirit of Wisdom invites us into a call full of joy.

Last week, Pentecost promised us the gift of peace and the presence of God's abiding love. Today we testify to the fruit of the Spirit that Paul places between love and peace.

Joy. A fruit of the Spirit's presence with us. A grace that we can give each other. A posture that we can grow into. A pure reaction to beauty and to goodness. A contagious sense of mutual delight that radiates from those who receive it and let it blossom within them. Joy keeps us coming back for more because we know that it doesn't run out. From its very source, it bubbles up. The Spirit of God is inexhaustible, abundant, full of joy.

If there is a day to list three items and three images in a sermon, it is Trinity Sunday. And I have three things that, I think, can enable us to live out our call more joyfully. And truthfully, I hope they inspire you to create your own list, to name for yourself the things that you might do and imagine as you go out and live your own joyful call. These are my three:

1. A wise and creative lens—spectacles of mutual delight.
2. Companions—so we may take this learning journey together.
3. And a nanny, practically perfect in every way—namely Mary Poppins.

Thanks to the Spirit of Wisdom, this call invites us to put on spectacles with creative lenses of hope and delight. This is the lens of abundance. This is the lens of faith, that there is more to go around than meets our naked eye. This is the lens that recognizes the gifts and vitality that are hidden in plain sight.

They're in this room. They're just outside. They're down the street.

Wisdom has been doing this since the very beginning, "rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race," as Proverbs says. If God can rejoice in creation and delight in humankind, why shouldn't we?

Perhaps God sees through lenses of wisdom and creativity that we just have not tried on yet. Perhaps we are too nearsighted. We're looking too narrowly at an aspect of a complex problem or at fully nuanced people. The gifts, the personality, their joy just obstructed because we are looking too closely.

Wisdom widens the lens. Wisdom reorients its vision to see the delight present in the bigger picture. Wisdom rejoices in the gifts of a community that they're showing already, humbly adding layers to a narrow scene that we had only previously perceived just narrowly.

Wisdom delights in the latent possibilities ready to be built up and then let them come even more alive. They're bubbling up just beneath the surface. This is how the Presbyterian Church and our Confession of 1967 says it: "Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope and preparing the world to receive its ultimate...redemption."

And the Church is not alone in committing itself to this view. Social innovators, positive psychologists, chief dreamers, and roving listeners are already doing this. They look past deficiencies and explore our capacities for human flourishing and abundant joy. They're celebrating our gifts, especially those flexed amid resistance and enduring despite fatigue.

They tend to pursue an assets-based approach to community development. They name the gifts and the good work worth celebrating before dwelling on a community's needs. It's not that the needs aren't real or worth addressing. They just aren't the full story. These innovators and dreamers have listened to the complex stories of their neighbors, heard their

frustration, but also glimpsed their redemption, heard their fear but also their great joy.

And so, they have developed wisdom and an awareness that, wherever they go, wherever we go, that the creative gifts of people are there already, beautifully blooming if we have the eyes to see. However severe or stark a community's needs appear to us, God our Creator is nonetheless delighting in their gifts and rejoicing in the ways that they have been fearfully and wonderfully made.

These are the spectacles of wisdom and delight that we might wear, too, to share God's view of our shared abundance as we embrace our joyful call.

Secondly, a joyful call requires companions, fellow travelers. In addition to Christ, who else will go with us to seek abundance and live out this good news? Who are our traveling companions? With whom will we co-labor? Who will we learn alongside? Who will we join?

Perhaps you remember that Luke refers to the twelve not as disciples but as apostles, ones who are sent. Matthew, still sending them, calls them disciples, meaning students, learners led by Christ to develop their skills in faith. When Jesus commissions us to go and make disciples, we are being asked to go on a learning journey as students, students of Christ learning beside other students. This is mutual delight. It's a mutual exchange between fellow disciples—some new and some more seasoned—as we journey together towards the way of Jesus, baptizing and teaching, blessing and learning.

Because we go as companions on this journey of mutuality and mission, Eugene Peterson, the creative biblical translator of *The Message*, says that a pilgrim is another appropriate synonym for disciple or apostle. Pilgrims are learning in transit, on mission with God. And of course, it's an apt description this morning at Second, as we are commissioned, a few lucky of us, to head off on our own pilgrimage.

We head off into the unknown, preparing to be changed but unsure how. We don't go alone. We have disciples beside us—students of grace and curiosity, humility and persistence, from whom we can learn at every turn. We have companions who will wade through the difficult moments with us, caring for us, buoying us, and widening the table so that we and our fears and our doubts and our sorrows can sit alongside our joy.

Joy itself is a companion emotion. Seldom does it exist alone, unfettered. Close companions such as fear and doubt usually join it. "They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy." "They came to him, and they worshiped him, but some doubted." Joy arrives unexpectedly, alongside other intense emotions, but it bursts forth and boldly presses on despite uncertainty and doubt. All the same, still joy swells.

Joy arrives as a quiet peace after an encouraging scan. As affirmation after an accomplishment well earned. After the pride in seeing someone that you love succeed. From the tenderness provided by a friend who knows your pain, and through tears of excitement in the presence of goodness and light. And thanks to the unmerited kindness and grace shared by a stranger, whose kindness rekindles your own hope.

Joy comes in many kinds, yet it so often is joined as a companion and a grace, joining us through our journeys through the darkest valleys and testifying to the foundation of delight and hope that is embedded already within God's creation.

Joy arrives unexpectedly. Without the right resume.

Third and finally, Mary Poppins—not the nanny the Banks family had looked to hire in the newspaper, but practically a perfect representation of the Spirit of Wisdom. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is..." with Mary Poppins. She arrives when the winds change. She brings a

spirit of revival to a family out of sorts. She draws this family into communion as they experience her wisdom and creativity and joy.

As Mrs. Banks, Winifred, tells her husband, George, "Since you hired Mary Poppins, the most extraordinary thing seems to have come over the household." Extraordinary things—or if you're looking for a synonym, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious things. They're happening in an ordinary home. They're happening here. Mary Poppins's spirit of wisdom is contagious.

Her joy inspires song throughout the household and across the town. Everywhere she goes, she meets folks, and they just burst forth in song (of course, it's a musical). She takes the children, Jane and Michael, on learning journeys through chalk paintings and for afternoon tea on the ceiling, kindling their sense of wonder, and proving to them, emphasizing the elevating effects of great laughter, and equipping them with a lasting lens of creativity and joy and wisdom.

As you can likely tell, her wisdom has stayed with me, too. In her song "A Spoonful of Sugar," her first lesson to the children, she speaks precisely to the essence of our joyful call on this great commission. "With every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and *snap*, the job's a game."

Second, our work as a church is fun. Bringing each other into deeper discipleship, baptizing one another, blessing each other's work, naming each other's gifts, delighting in the world around us, worshiping side by side. How can we keep from singing? This is a joyful call.

God is with us, Second Church. We are here, ready to go. And we have some fun work to do. Amen.