



October 14, 2018

Church: God Sends the Spirit to Give Us a Purpose
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 24:36-49 NRSV

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

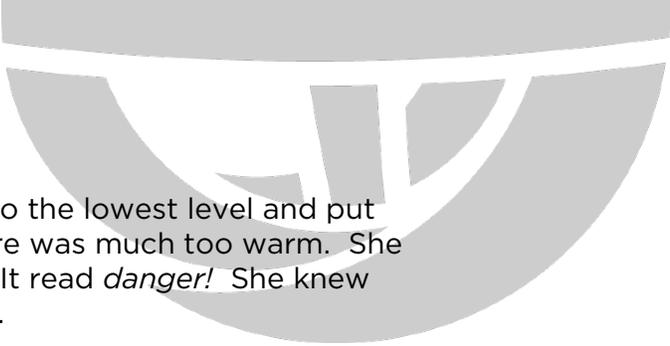
⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Acts 2:17, 21 NRSV

¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

This past Wednesday night Ruth Monson, our Congregational Life Minister, was getting ready for worship. She'd gotten communion set up and checked in with the worship assistants. She was hoping to get out of here early - to not stay for worship - because her husband Glenn had just gotten home from two weeks in Tanzania. Understandably, Ruth really wanted to spend some time with him before jet lag sent him off to bed.



After supper, Ruth took a few leftover pizzas down to the lowest level and put them in the refrigerator. She noticed the temperature was much too warm. She looked at the thermostat and it was in the mid-60s. It read *danger!* She knew right then and there that she had a decision to make.

This is how Ruth described the moment in an email to me: “Pastor Vern thinks I’m a saint. That’s what he was calling me that night. But I have to confess: my first thought was that I could just quietly walk away, go home, and no one would need to know.” Ruth went on: “That’s not something I’m proud of. But then I thought of Jan Vetter and all the Open Table people who had food stored in that refrigerator. And I thought of Cathy Grabau, Pat Frazee, and all the lefse makers who were depending on the dough being the right temperature on Thursday morning. So,” said Ruth, “I did not walk away. I made a few phone calls about the food. I rounded up a team of willing volunteers. And together we were able to save most of what was in the refrigerator.” And, in case you’re wondering, the faithful lefse makers who showed up early on Thursday morning did not miss a beat.

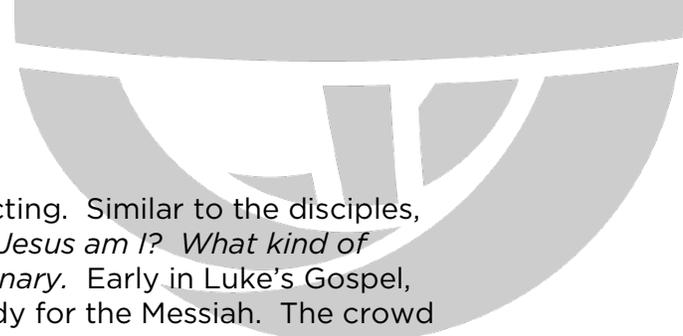
Despite Ruth’s confession, I still think she’s a saint – well, most of the time. Who of us hasn’t had similar thoughts, about any number of issues? Should I answer the telephone when so-and-so calls, or just let it ring? Should I be an advocate for those in the LBGTQ community...or let them fight their own battles? Should I reach out to that friend who’s hurting...or put it off till another day? Should I stand up for a victim of sexual assault...or keep my mouth shut? As I read Ruth’s email, I was struck by how often being the church involves a choice. *Yes, I will; or no, I won’t; at least not now.*

In today’s Bible reading, we get a first-hand look at one of the choices facing the early church. The disciples are gathered with the risen Christ. It’s sometime after Easter. They’re filled with doubts and questions and more than a little fear. They’re not sure how to make sense of Jesus’ death. They’re not sure if he actually rose from the dead. In fact, they’re afraid they might be seeing a ghost. I can imagine many of them wanting to pack up and head home to Galilee. Who knows, maybe they can get their old jobs back again.

In the midst of their doubts and confusion, Jesus takes a piece of fish and eats it. Something’s going on – Jesus appears to be more than a ghost – but what is he? Jesus explains Scripture to them, reminding them of things they talked about before he died. He implies that maybe Good Friday wasn’t a tragedy after all, but rather something God could use. And God could use it not only to build up their own shaky faith, but to enable them to go out into the world with a boldness they did not have before.

Do you see where this is going? A little like Ruth Monson standing before that refrigerator, the disciples have a decision to make: *to go home* or *to stay and get ready*. “If you stay,” Jesus is telling them, “you’ll need to wait just a little longer. You will be empowered by the Holy Spirit. And you will share Christ’s forgiveness and hope with those who need it most.”





This is an amazing story. It's also a bit convicting. Similar to the disciples, we can't help but wonder: *What kind of follower of Jesus am I? What kind of difference can I possibly make? My gifts are so ordinary.* Early in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist is preaching about how to get ready for the Messiah. The crowd asks him, "What should we do?" John replies, "If you have two coats, give one away. Same with extra food. Share it." Tax collectors ask him, "What should we do?" John tells them, "No more extortion - collect only what's required by law." Soldiers ask him, "What should we do?" John responds, "No shakedowns, no blackmail - and be content with your rations."

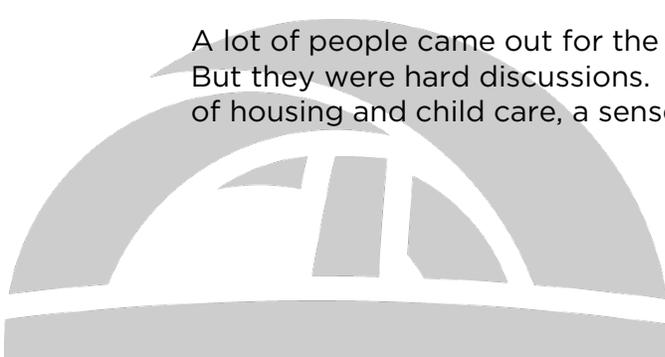
In case you missed it, these are plain, ordinary, rough-around-the-edges folks. My bishop in Colorado, Wayne Weissenbuehler, was fond of saying: "If I were God, I would have started with a better class of people." But not the God we meet in Jesus. Jesus calls fishermen and farmers, tax collectors and soldiers, homemakers and revolutionaries, and all of them get asked to do things - often little things - that that can make more of a difference than they realize.

As followers of Jesus, isn't that our story too? It's the teacher who stays after class to help a student who's struggling. It's the friend who brings over a pot of chicken soup when you're not feeling well. It's the mom who finds it in her heart to forgive, even though she's been deeply wounded. Here's what's happening: Ordinary people - when faced with a choice - decide to do ordinary things. But often they end up getting some extraordinary results. The hard part, of course, is to believe it, to see the sacred in the middle of everyday life, to trust God's Spirit to blow where it will.

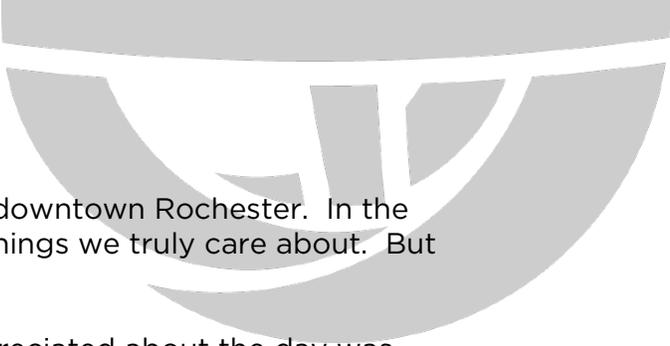
Eventually, Jesus' early believers get into a rhythm of weekly worship. They gather to read Scripture, to sing, to pray, to break bread together. Why do they gather weekly? David Lose suggests that a week is about as long as we should go without a reminder of God's promises to us. We believe in a God who promises to love us, to forgive us, and to walk with us every step of the way. But after a while, we tend to forget those promises. We need to be reminded.

There's something else we need to be reminded of too. It's so easy for us to forget the bigger picture. We start to think of church as God and me, or perhaps God and us. We become a cozy little club which gathers to meet *our* needs. "But that's only half the story," Jesus is saying. "Wait for power from on high. I want to use you to share my love and to bless the whole world."

A couple of weeks ago at Zumbro we had an event called "Vision 2019 and Beyond." It was part of the discernment process for our facility. The thinking behind the day went something like this: If we're going to do something with our building, it should be inspired by who we're trying to serve in our little corner of the mission field.



A lot of people came out for the visioning event. We had some good discussions. But they were hard discussions. Lots of concerns were lifted up - the affordability of housing and child care, a sense of belonging in a highly polarized society, a



need for stability in the midst of so much change in downtown Rochester. In the end, we made some progress. We identified some things we truly care about. But there's still more discerning to do.

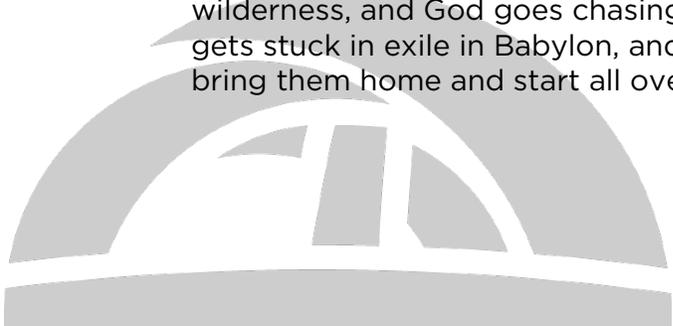
I wish the process were easier. But what I really appreciated about the day was this: we were sincerely trying to make a connection between what we do in here *and* what we do out there. In so many words, it felt like we were waiting for power from on high. We were getting closer to a time of decision. In the process, we were striving to be faithful to the work God is giving us to do. And that's at the heart of being the church.

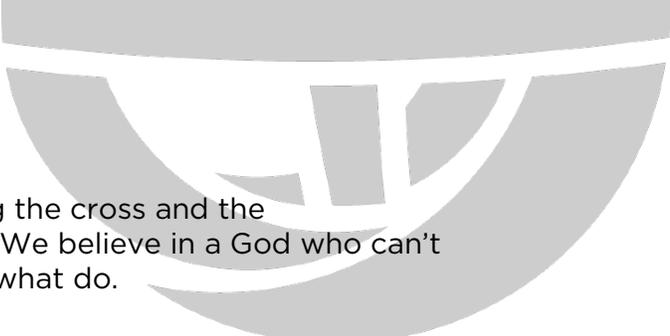
Many of you know that I recently spent a week with my daughter, Ingrid, in Houston, Texas. She was in the hospital. Ingrid has been having some serious health issues over the last few years, including pancreatitis. Like a lot of health issues, it has greatly affected her personal well-being. This is Ingrid's story to share, so I won't go into the details. But I will say this: Many of you have approached me expressing your concern. You've said things like: "We're worried about Ingrid and your family. We're praying for you. We will stand by you." Please know that I am deeply grateful for your concern and your love. It means more than I can say. It's the church at its best.

Even as I share Ingrid's story, however, I have a challenge for you: Can we be a church that offers support and encouragement not only to each other, but also to those who are not yet here, and maybe to those who never will be here? Can we be a church that shares the love of Jesus far and wide, and actively strives to be a blessing to those who need it most? Can we be a church that more often than not says *yes, I will* rather than *no, I won't*?

Here's the truth: God is already at work in our world, in more ways than we can possibly imagine. God is at work in through doctors and nurses, coaches and teachers, politicians and pundits, moms and dads and children too. God is at work in good government and well-paying jobs and crucial decisions in caring for creation. As we're standing before that refrigerator, the question is: "Will we hold back or join in?" Clearly, we can't save the whole world, but can do something with our ordinary gifts right here and right now. Christopher Wright once said, "It's not so much that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world." In other words, God is already out there. God is already busy. And God is ready and willing to put us to work in caring for the world that God so loves.

We're coming to the end of our *Back to the Basics* sermon series. If I've learned anything in this series, it's that we believe in a God who desperately wants to be in a relationship with us. God creates the world good. We are made in God's image. Then Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden fruit, and God goes chasing after them, and eventually clothes them. Israel is wandering hopelessly in the wilderness, and God goes chasing after them with a covenant and the law. Israel gets stuck in exile in Babylon, and God goes chasing after them with a promise to bring them home and start all over again with a new covenant. God comes in the





person of Jesus, chasing after the whole world, using the cross and the resurrection to call people back into a relationship. We believe in a God who can't seem to stop loving us, no matter where we go and what do.

This is the greatest story ever told. As followers of Jesus, this is our story. But it doesn't belong only to us. This is God's story. And God wants to use us, the church - with ordinary gifts and all - to share the love of Jesus and bless the world in more ways than we can imagine. Amen.

