

Pentecost Sunday May 23 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14- John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

We are emerging from a time of battling something which steals our breath, which forced us to act in ways that made us feel alone. One that left us like Ezekiel in his vision, looking at the dry bones of empty church buildings and wondering “Can these bones live?” Will people come back? Will we assemble again around the gifts God has given us of Word and Sacrament- the very definition of church in our denomination? While, thanks be to God, we are today making some progress towards that goal, only God knows the full answer.

But this is the same God who told Ezekiel to prophesy- to speak! Even when there appeared to be no one to hear. Just dry bones. Yet the power of the ruach- the spirit, breath of God, is such that it creates hearers. In the vision, as Ezekiel speaks, the bones begin to rattle and come together. Until they are made whole again. This ought to be no surprise to us Christians who happen to be Lutheran. That the Holy Spirit is a powerful force from God that works through the Word of God, to bring life even out of what seems dead. That comes through the means that we wield. We, our words and actions, are a way that the Holy Spirit is set loose in this world.

There is power in what we say and do. The old saw, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not quite accurate- is it. Words can hurt. They can cut more deeply than the sharpest knife. Shape the reality of self-perception.

The late author and pastor Mark Yaconelli writes about Margaret who lived for 40 plus years with the story of one day in her one room schoolhouse burned into her very being. Margaret and her teacher, a harsh woman, did not get along well. Finally, when she was nine, this animosity boiled over. That day Margaret raced back into the classroom after recess, late again. Her teacher was furious, “Margaret! We’ve been waiting for you! Get up here to the front of the class, right now!” Margaret slowly walked to the teacher’s desk, was told to face the class.

Her teacher spoke, “Boys and girls, Margaret has been a bad girl. I have tried to help her be responsible. But apparently, she doesn’t want to learn. So, we must teach her a lesson. We must force her to face what a selfish person she has become. I want each of you to come to the front of the room, take a piece of chalk, and write something bad about Margaret on the blackboard. Maybe this experience will motivate her to become a better person!”

Margaret stood frozen next to her teacher as one by one the students processed to the blackboard. One by one they wrote their life-smothering words, ones that weighed on Margaret for decades. “Margaret is stupid! Margaret is selfish! Margaret is fat! Margaret is a dummy!” On and on until 25 testaments to Margaret’s badness were blazoned across the blackboard.

Margaret walked home that day with those words written across her soul, she crawled into bed, claiming sickness, and tried to cry the pain away. It never left. Forty years later, sitting in her psychologist’s office, she realized that she had slowly become what those students had written. The words spoken that day

shaped her into what they spoke. Words have power- power to steal life, to destroy it, to wound it.

Even when we can ignore those words directed at ourselves- words spoken can shape the reality we live in. Make our very existence to be something that people hate, see as inferior. Make people afraid of us. Because of our skin color. Our religion (or lack thereof), our politics. The words we speak lay the foundation for the actions we take. Those actions we take build the world we and others live in.

Our words have power- but the Word that is Jesus Christ is more powerful- for, as Jesus says, he is the Truth. And that truth is that Margaret is beloved of God, worthy of dying for. She is uniquely gifted and called. And so are you. The Holy Spirit which is the breath that carries that Word is more powerful. Blowing that truth of God's love for you, for this crazy, messed up world into all the dark corners and crevices of our lives and bringing with it the Light of Christ to shine in the darkness and bring hope.

Baptized children of God- bearers of God's image- carriers of the Holy Spirit and God's saving grace into the world- What is the Spirit doing in you today? Can you feel it stirring in you? That sensation that you should speak up in this moment- a Word to counter the hate being thrown at another, a lie being told. Can you feel it stirring you to listen- to the lived experience of another- so unlike yours but also truth? To grow in understanding of their life, so that you might love them better.

Baptized children of God- bearers of God's image- carriers of the Holy Spirit and God's saving grace into the world. What future is the Spirit using you to build? What future are you building for your children, your grandchildren, both biological and those who are made so through the waters of baptism? Through

Peter and the other disciples, the Holy Spirit moved and three thousand were transformed in one day—devoting themselves to learning what the apostles had to teach about Jesus, to fellowship with other believers, to sharing in worship together around the table and prayer. What future is the Spirit calling us to build here at St. John in Ely?

Baptized children of God—bearers of God’s image—carriers of the Holy Spirit and God’s saving grace into the world. What words are coming out of your mouth? Are they the Word about Jesus Christ—ones that bear the Holy Spirit—through which people will be claimed and called into their own discipleship? Are they words that speak of the image of God that all of us bear? Are they words of grace, forgiveness, love for all? Are they words that work for understanding and reconciliation?

For anything less is by definition Anti-Christ. Against God and God’s will.

This is a struggle we have every day, isn’t it? To tame the spirit in us that is not holy. That wants revenge, that desires power, that sees others as less than, that believes we have all the answers, that our lived experience is the Truth. The same spirit which drove those children to testify to the worst in Margaret those long years ago. That drives us still today as we write epithets about our fellow human beings, our fellow citizens, on the blackboard of social media.

Thanks be to God we have the Paraclete, the advocate, Holy Spirit who comes alongside us. To help and guide. To fill and empower us, to teach us! Oh, we so need to learn.

And through this Holy Spirit given to us, we bear fruit! We have heard Paul in Galatians name that fruit—first love. A self-giving love toward all. And then all

those other fruits that spring from that tree of love; joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Friends in Christ- as we celebrate the next step in the journey for these graduating seniors, as we gladly welcome into our fellowship others who have encountered this Holy Spirit, may we be afflicted with the fire of the Holy Spirit- a stirring in us that cannot be denied- to go forth and proclaim in word and deed the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, to strive for justice and peace in the whole earth, and to love others with the same abandon that God has loved us. For in this way, God's will is done on earth as in heaven. Thanks be to God!