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John 20:19-31
"God loved the world so God sent you"

The message today is about being sent by Jesus to continue his good work in the world.

The context is pretty simple. The disciples are hanging out in a room after Jesus' death. They think that the people who killed Jesus might be after them so they're lying low and they are afraid.

Consequently, the resurrected Jesus appears in their midst and says "peace be with you." He shows them his pierced hands and side to verify his real presence and his authority.

The passage continues: "The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'"

These powerful words are in the same league as Jesus' commandment for his followers to love as he loved us. We are called to love and to love as Jesus loved. Every aspect and act of Jesus' caring ministry becomes ministry for us.

"As God sent me, so I send you." Here, at the end of Jesus ministry, and the beginning of his departure from the world, he encourages his disciples to look back at his ministry, from beginning to end, and to acknowledge that they also are sent by God into the world.

We read the gospels every Sunday to understand how Jesus' ministry can be ministry for us.

We read Jesus' mandate for ministry in Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's a mandate for us in the 21st century.

We cast our gaze over the world and reflect on Luke's words. A couple of examples...

"Release to the captives" in the 21st century goes something like this: "God loves you. You are precious in God's sight. You have value and worth and we are going to do our best to help you be free. If it's spiritual captivity we offer you the spirit of freedom in Christ. If it's emotional captivity know the peace that God gives in Christ. If you have been jailed for a crime we will do our best to ensure that the jail and the jailers don't increase your pain and we will work for restorative justice and support groups who help you get back on your feet when you get out of jail."

“Recovery of sight” to the blind in the 21st century goes something like this: “We know that Jesus speaks in spiritual and physical terms. How did you become spiritually blind? What prevents you from seeing the light of Christ? We are here to listen to your story and after we have heard we will share how we were blind and how we saw again. We sing hymns like “Amazing Grace” written by John Newton who started out as a captain on a slave ship and tells how wretched he felt. He speaks about a dream that led him to God’s amazing grace which saved him from his dehumanizing occupation and led him into ministry. He writes: ‘I was blind and now I see.’ If you are physically blind we will pray for you and for the doctors and nurses who work with you.”

This is ministry for us and we choose our ways of engaging. If we are a doctor, nurse or therapist our Christian work is healing. We heal first and earn a living second. If we are in finance or insurance our fair dealings are our ministry, and so on. As members of families, caring for our families is our ministry...

There are so many stories of Jesus to draw from. We read of Jesus teaching, healing, praying, communicating with every race and class of people, challenging the unjust, and feeding, and these become ministries for us.

What aspect of Jesus’ ministry do you most resonate with? If you like it develop it in your life and ministry. What aspect of his ministry do you have most difficulty with? Pray about it and see if God wants you to develop it. What aspect challenges you most?

I was reading an interview with Billy Graham this week and he said, not surprisingly, that his “basic calling remains what it has been for many years: to be an evangelist – one who declares the good news that Christ will forgive us and reconcile us to God and to each other if we will turn to God in trust and faith.”

“Jesus Christ,” he says, “has changed my life, and He will change the life of anyone who sincerely turns to Him in faith.”

Being sent is not a big mystical thing although it could be if your name is Thomas Merton. For most of us it is being the best, most alive (that’s the meaning of the resurrection) human being we can be given our personalities.

I belong to a book group. No one has shared their religious affiliation in the group. Some are Jewish. One person seems to be Unitarian-Universalist. Another is a former seminarian and a former college professor in English. Others don’t seem to hold onto any religion. They know that I am a pastor. The word gets out since I am a public figure. The best I can be in the group, in other words, the best Christ person I can be, is to be myself and respond critically to a book like everyone else. I have no agenda save being a sensitive and caring participant in the group.

I notice religious allusions and comment on them like recently agreeing with a participant’s concern about the Russian Czar Nicolas’s Christian hypocrisy in Leo Tolstoy’s novel *Hadji Murat*. A member of the group mentioned that she wants to attend our worship service.

Has God sent me to the book group? Maybe. I hope that my being there makes some contribution to beauty and humanity. To be sent is to go with whatever resources, gifts, interests, skills and values we have developed in our relationship with God in Christ and in our participation in church.

When I was a journalist I wrote an expose about a two-star mountain resort hotel that exploited its workers and provided the worst living conditions for them (this was South Africa in the days of apartheid). The story came out with the headline: "Two-star squalor." Was I sent to do this work? I was sent by my editor to do the story and by God to do it in a way that contributed to a more just society.

Last weekend a stranger entered our Fellowship Hall and enquired about the breakfast stated on the Easter banner. We invited her to our table. She is a first generation Mexican-American and grew up in Southern California. She's between addresses and was on her way to the shopping mall when she passed the church.

We remember Jesus' words: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:35-40)

There is so much in the words and actions of Jesus that it becomes quite daunting to be sent as Jesus was sent.

Remember John 3:16? Some post it on football and baseball stadiums. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Add verse 17 which is equally as important: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

If we take today's gospel to heart we read: For God so loved the world that he gave you and me, so that everyone who believes in what we communicate about Jesus in word and deed may not perish but may have eternal life...God did not send us into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be made whole through Jesus Christ.

God loved the world so God sent you – and me. When we step out of this building today the world will become a better, more human and life-affirming place because we are sent to be Christ's persons in the world. Amen.