

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 16, 2010
I Kings 19:9-18, Portions of I Corinthians 15, and I John 3:2

AGAINST DISCOURAGEMENT

Today is the seventh of the seven Sundays of Easter, and we have been asking what the resurrection of Jesus, who was crucified for us, means to us in the “here and now” of our life on this earth. We began on Easter Sunday itself by recalling the many ways in which Jesus’ life and the significance of his ministry were negated at the end by his public shaming, his torture, his desertion by his friends and disciples, his feeling of abandonment by God, and his death. All his hopeful promises seemed lost and he himself reduced to nothing.

It is most important to understand what Jesus did *for us* and *united with us*. He entered into our humanity, subjecting himself, not only to the human body’s limitations and physical embarrassments, but also to the negations of life’s higher hopes and greater meanings that we suffer as we move from birth to death. Life has countless ways, petty and profound, of saying to us from the time we enter school until our final breaths, “You really are not worth so very much after all.” Jesus endured life’s humiliations in the extreme. He was mocked and taunted, beaten and spit upon, and he was tortured to death.

But as long as the one whose life is being negated, brought down nothing, is still loved by God, death cannot win. That’s why Paul cries out from his Letter to the Romans, “If God is for us, who is against us?” That cry of hope in defiance of all discouragement and defeat is not at all the same of Rome’s later exploitation of Christian faith in the Emperor Constantine’s belligerent vision of the cross, “In this sign you conquer.” No, Jesus took the way of empathy and compassion, never the way of power and coercion in the name of God.

Jesus’ resurrection is the triumph of God’s love over the negations of his life, but Jesus did not suffer and die for himself. He did not endure humiliation just to overcome it for himself but in solidarity with all who are reduced to shame. The message of Easter is that Jesus’ resurrection is meant by God to become our life-giving hope. We are included with him as people too much loved by God to be allowed to be finally reduced to nothing by life or by death. With him, we also matter too much to be given up or forgotten.

The gospel, however, offers no comfort without its corresponding challenge. The gift of life comes with a summons to wake up and live in a new way. The promise of heaven is made as a call to turn around and start caring about the things that matter to heaven, meaning

to God. Jesus came our way so he could take us his way. To believe in the risen Christ is take up the way of the cross. God's "No!" to death's power to negate our lives requires us to turn away from the worship of power, prestige, and wealth, away from indifference to the sufferings and disadvantages of other people, and away from the pretense to autonomy that proudly declares that only I and my very own matter to me. Sin is alienation. It is our denial of our relatedness to God and to each other. As long as we think sin is just a matter of vices and cravings, we will never see that sin at its worst is dressed up finely, looking very respectable, and quite likely sounding very pious and persuasive in one way or another.

I need to admit in this final sermon for this year's season of Easter that the way of the cross can become very discouraging. Taking the way of the cross is not a matter of having some particular affliction — what people call their "cross to bear" — but, instead, a matter of living in Jesus' way of empathy and compassion, trusting God to make such apparent weakness and foolishness count for something in the long run. You see, the thing about the love of power is that it always seizes and then wields the power. The same is true for the love of prestige and the love of wealth: they take what they need to become self-justifying and to squeeze out the poor, the nameless, and the non-influential. Who cares about the opinions of a homeless person, a battered woman who isn't even married to the man who beats her, a teacher whose students can't even pass the state tests let alone get into Harvard, a pregnant teenager, or a migrant farm worker?

This world loves simple numbers that supposedly tell the whole story about a person, a school, a business, a church, a group of people, the society itself, or a nation. I suppose this number-love goes back to former generations' question, "How much is he worth?" which meant only, "How much money does he have?" We like to pretend that one great number such as the Gross Domestic Product tells the whole story of a nation's success or failure. Did the GDP go up or down? That's all we need to know, right? Did the test scores go up or down? What's your I.Q.? How many years of relevant experience do you have? How old are you? That's one example in which having the number go up turns at some point from a positive to a negative.

What does the Gross Domestic Product tell us about the heart and soul of a nation, about the quality of life for its people, about freedom or opportunity, about integrity or love? Can we really evaluate this thing called life by some number?

By the numbers, Jesus was a remarkable failure, who ended up with nothing, and pointing out the eventual power and glory of Christendom does not count. If the glory to which Christian Europe rose and from which it has fallen really mattered to God, then we should be putting our trust in Constantine, not Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus came to be human as God wants human to be, to love this world and its people and not give up until he could

love us out of our selfishness, greed, alienation from God and each other, and fear of seeing ourselves as we truly are. His church exists for those reasons: to be human and becoming human as God wants human to be, and to love this world and its people for him until they stop refusing to be loved. The struggle is to overcome alienation. That's what being Christ's church is really all about, and there is no number for that.

Some days it seems we can't win. We listen, and what do we hear? We hear people professing faith in Jesus Christ and shouting hatred from the same mouths. We hear the snide dismissals of the worth of some group of people who are "them" not "us." Then we get the news, and whether we get it from the TV, the Internet, the printed newspapers, or the radio, it renews each day our realization that earth is a brutal place. We may find ourselves wondering how God can possibly love humanity when human beings exhibit so little of it, when people are capable of rejoicing over what should be unspeakable cruelty.

But when it seems we can't win and may not even be doing very well on Jesus' terms in our own lives, we need to be reminded that as long as God does not stop loving us, we can't be lost. The resurrection is not a surprise ending that turns the apparent defeat of Jesus into a rags-to-riches triumph; the resurrection is God's vindication of the negated Jesus we crucified. And Jesus as the risen Son of God is not separable from Jesus the human being who took the way of empathy and compassion and followed it to the end. That's why Paul concludes his message of our resurrection hope with this word he speaks against discouragement: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord *your labor is not in vain.*" Nobody writes something like that without having felt the downward pull of discouragement. No one cries out for renewal who has not felt depleted. No one seeks help getting up who has not fallen or been knocked down. People who think being Christian means always being fully convinced of the gospel, unbearably certain about what's true, and dead-sure of salvation haven't yet really tried following Jesus. Certitude is not faith, and perfect people with no guilt or shame have no need for the grace of God and no use for it, either.

Life is very humbling experience. And the more we care about other people, the more vulnerable we make ourselves to pain and discouragement. But by now I hope we are realizing that what theologians call the Incarnation of the Word, the Son of God's becoming flesh, is all about the vulnerability that comes from loving this world and its people. The truly greatest power in the universe becomes strong precisely in its vulnerability. To let ourselves be loved by God into empathy and compassion for other people is the most life-changing thing we can do, and to start down that path is to begin shedding my autonomy and gaining my freedom from the loneliness of it. Love is the process of gaining strength by becoming vulnerable, which makes no sense to those who still worship power, prestige, and wealth, but is, we learn from Jesus Christ, the way to freedom and wholeness. Amen.