

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted (Matthew 28:17). There are only eleven of them now; one of the original twelve so despaired of his betrayal of Jesus that he took his own life. They've made the tedious trek from the great and powerful city of Jerusalem, back to rural Galilee, to a mountain, that honestly probably wasn't much of a mountain, given the geography. They see Jesus, well after his crucifixion and resurrection, and they worship him. But some doubted.

They can't have doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead. That has been established by then. They must have doubted themselves. Whether they were even vaguely capable of going over the next hill and making even tepid disciples of 1% of the next village, let alone disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). They couldn't have doubted that Jesus had risen; but they surely hadn't forgotten how they had betrayed him.¹ They had to be doubting their own abilities to do what Jesus was commanding them to do.

After this past week, watching our country fail, we can understand how they feel. So many of us feel that George Floyd's death was avoidable and the police officers involved should be arrested. And we believe that the system of policing in this country has different rules for black and brown people, a corruption that needs to be eliminated. And we believe that looting and burning is immoral and counterproductive and those who do that should go to jail. And we believe that mass protests and civil disruptions are legitimate forms of protest. We believe all that at the same time and we're told that peaceful protest is the only acceptable form of protest, by the same people who said that kneeling during the national anthem is an insult to the military who are now being asked to use force against American citizens. We don't doubt Jesus. But we certainly doubt our own ability to teach what Jesus taught: Love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

On this Trinity Sunday, the Scripture reading from Matthew reminds us that Jesus has commissioned us to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). For many, that doesn't sound like there is one God, but rather three. It's something we're used to, this three in one, one in three. So we don't really think about it. One God makes much more sense. If Jesus was a part of God from the beginning, that implies that there was something in God that was missing from the beginning. That God could be affected by something outside God's self. And in this broken world full of

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, in *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 248.

suffering that we inflict on each other, we need God to be unchangeable, to be the one whole thing.²

The early Christians struggled with how to express this three in one, one in three. Here's what they figured out. From the beginning, God has been in relationship. Unity with God means your identity is not swallowed up and annihilated, but established. God exercises power by self-giving. So when Jesus meets the coercive power that wants to take his life, Jesus doesn't protect his identity by trying to hold on to it. He serves us by showing absolutely that God will sustain who he is, not just in a single point in history but forever.³

Jesus invites us into that relationship, into that mutuality and power. Jesus assures us that by being in relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, our identity is preserved, God will sustain us through God's unending power of self-giving.⁴

So as followers of Jesus, we are in relationship with George Floyd. We are in relationship with George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbury, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Pamela Turner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald, Antonio Arce, Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, Sean Reed, and Walter Scott. We are in relationship with the 111,000⁵ people who have died in the U.S. of Covid-19. We are in relationship with the millions of people out of work.

Yes, we are in relationship with all of them. And we have to live our lives showing that we recognize that relationship. No wonder we doubt ourselves. The list of the dead, injured and damaged is never ending. It's a gap that can never be closed.

And as followers of Jesus, we are in relationship with Derek Chauvin who knelt on George Floyd's neck. We're in relationship the White House staffers who thought a photo shoot in front of an Episcopal Church was worth pepper spraying non-violent protestors. We're in relationship with every looter coming to a peaceful protest with demolition tools. We're in relationship with Amy Cooper, who felt entitled to call 911 when a birdwatcher in Central Park asked her to put her dog on a leash.

² Stephen B. Boyd, "Trinity Sunday, Theological Perspective, Matthew 28:16-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 46.

³ Boyd, 48.

⁴ Boyd, 48.

⁵ Wikipedia, *Covid-19 Pandemic Data*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:COVID-19_pandemic_data, (accessed June 6, 2020).

Yes, we are in relationship with all of them. And we have to live our lives showing that we recognize that relationship. No wonder we doubt ourselves. The list of those seeking to use coercive force against our neighbors is never ending. It's a gap that can never be closed.

As followers of Jesus we are in relationship with [Killer Mike](#) who stood with the Mayor and Police Chief of Atlanta and called for change. We are in relationship with [Kaleth O. Wright](#), Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force who described what he is doing to improve his community. We are in relationship with [Sheriff Christopher Swanson](#) of Genessee County, which includes Flint, MI, who wanted to show is relationship with the community. We are in relationship with the [Right Reverend Mariann Budde](#), Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, who spoke out against using a Bible and a church as a political prop after using mounted police and pepper spray to clear the churchyard of peaceful protestors.

We have doubts. But Jesus had none. All authority. All nations. All that he commanded. All the days of the age.⁶ Jesus had the disciples he wanted and he gave them a great and never-ending commission. He promised he would be with us always. So at this time when it feels like our country is failing, like we are failing Jesus, when we are all alone in the heart of pandemic, economic collapse and riot, know this. We are in relationship with God. God's self-giving love will guide us, give us companions on the way. The gap that can never be closed because of the relationships we are in, as immense as it is, is smaller than the gap between life and death, the gap that Jesus closed forever, for all nations, for all time. Full of doubt, we are the ones Jesus has chosen for this moment to live the truth of our relationship with God into the relationships we have with the rest of this world. Amen.

⁶ Meda A. A. Stamper, "Trinity Sunday, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 28:16-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 47.