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Now What?

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New Revised Standard Version,

Mark 12:30-31: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’

Matthew 28:16-20:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Luke 4:16-I 20: When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘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 favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

I am delighted that we will have a little celebration and some cake to celebrate my graduation! As you might know, I signed up for this program in February of 2020. Though people had mentioned a doctorate here and there, somehow when a church member, Colin O’Connell, mentioned it at a funeral reception, the idea became firmly planted in my heart. I was supposed to spend a month in Chicago each year for three years, with all sorts of work leading up to and coming out of that time. But as you know, a month after applying and being accepted, all hell broke loose in our world. The pandemic arrived and borders were closed. The program, like everything else, had to quickly figure out if it was going ahead and how. They managed to pivot to virtual learning, and my entire degree ended up being online. The first time I saw the campus was for my graduation!

When we drove up to the border and the official asked my reason for entering the U.S., I told him I was graduating. He asked me what program I graduated from,

and I told him I was clergy and that it was a Doctorate in Ministry. Then he looked at me and said, “What are you going to do with *that?*” I laughed and said, “More of the same?” Then he told me I had to go inside and figure out my visa.

When you study in the U.S. you need a student visa. The school and I had started that visa application, but then everything changed. You don’t need a visa to study online, you only need a visa if you’re going to spend time in the US. Normally the school would have closed the visa application at the end of my studies, but because I never really used it, they didn’t — so the border didn’t know what to do with me! Four different customs officers huddled together trying to figure it out. Then one of them just asked if I had paid my tuition. When I said “Yes” he replied “You’re free to go. Congratulations!” “*What are you going to do with that?*”

This is part two from last week. Last week was Pentecost, the day those first followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the church. In a way, Pentecost was like the graduation ceremony of the early church. They had done their studies with Jesus and now they were called to live it and work it. We might well insert ourselves into the scriptures and say to that early church who had received the Holy Spirit “*What are you going to do with that?*” What now? But not just them and not just me, but you too! Those of you who dare to call yourselves Christian or followers of Jesus — what are *you* doing with that? What is the call of the church?

Our scripture reading has three different calls of the church or of Christians, but there are more. The scriptures are filled with those calls. We might add to them Micah 6:8 “*What does the Lord require of you? To seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*” What are we called to today?

I think some of that call never changes. Over 2000 years of history our call to love God fully and to love our neighbour does not change. *How* we love, *how* we show that love does change. Over 2000 years the call to make disciples has not changed, but *how* we do that does. We do it in part through actions of love and justice.

We’ve been pretty good at that. We have cared for the hungry with programs like the Sunday Supper. We do that through gathering food this Sunday. We do that through walking in the Pride Parade, sponsoring refugees and coming alongside Ukrainian displaced people and in countless other ways.

We have also been and are a pretty welcoming community. Being racially inclusive and welcoming is a high value in this church. I have to be careful when I say that because most churches think they are welcoming and friendly because they are welcoming and friendly with each other. There is certainly room for

improvement. It's pretty easy to fall through the cracks and be able to come to worship and not have people reach out. But I was encouraged when just last week we had a person who just recently started attending our church share at our open mic 'God Sightings' time at the evening service. They said they felt just so incredibly welcomed in this church! That is a testament to you. That is wonderful.

One of the favourite quotes of our denomination, attributed to St. Francis, is "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary." It's a great quote that could be part of our motto here at Wall Street. It's like when Liza sings in My Fair Lady "*Don't talk of love, show me!*" It's "actions speak louder than words." However, the call to love God and love our neighbour and to make disciples needs to also include talking about our faith.

When I was in Chicago there was someone with a loudspeaker on top of their car driving through the downtown preaching away and telling, (maybe even assaulting) pedestrians with the message that they needed to be saved and to believe in Jesus. I don't know who is converted by that kind of message. I sort of wonder if they do it not because it is in any way effective but because they can say at the Pearly Gates "Well, I tried!" Except not only is it not effective, a lot of the time that kind of proclamation is damaging.

Remember last week we talked about the 'nones'? (Those who have no church background). If that is all they see of Christianity, then all of us get labelled with that brush stroke. Actions are important. But if we don't give voice to the reason for our action, in this post-Christendom era, people won't know.

1 Peter 3:15 reads "Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have within, but do this with gentleness and respect." Other translations read "Always be prepared to give *the reason you have* for the hope within..." Part of it is about giving the reason. Helping people to understand, this is the reason.

I was at a fundraising dinner and a person at our table asked what our church does for homeless people. I explained that in the past we hosted the shelter at the church and that now it is less formal, like free meals on a Sunday and free meals on Fridays, and that we'll listen and pray if they are in a space to have a conversation. Then he said, "Why do you do that?" All I could say was "Because we're Christian. This is part of our faith. Seeing a homeless person as our neighbour is a central part of our faith." He seemed surprised. It's not that he didn't care about the homeless, but the problem seemed too overwhelming to do anything. If we don't share the reason for doing this, our faith will die with us.

In the last century the church didn't need to do that — people were born United and grew up United (or Anglican or Presbyterian or...). It doesn't work that

way anymore. But the reason for sharing our faith is not ultimately for *us*. It's so that others might have some of what we have. So many people have shared with me the thought that they can't imagine how they would have faced whatever struggle they are going through without their faith. I feel the same way. I am so grateful for a life of faith. When I work myself into an anxious lather of worry, praying grounds me and gives me peace. It's not always instant, but it really does help.

A life of faith gives me an anchor in a world where I feel way too many demands. There are a ton of things I could worry and care about, but faith says that *God is God and I'm not*. My faith has God saying — "*I'm calling you to care about this today and not that. I've called others to care about that.*"

If we want more people to experience the transforming love of Jesus, we have to use our words and tell them about it. Our church banners are part of our call here at Wall Street. *De Profundis, Extra Muros*. "Out of the depths, beyond the walls." The last thing I want to do is to look like the guy in the car with the loudspeaker in Chicago or the guy on Parliament Hill doing the same thing.

What are *you* going to do with that? What are you going to do with your faith? What is your particular call that will reach beyond yourself? How can you imagine sharing in actions and in words of love?

I'm not particularly good at sharing my faith outside the church because it makes me stand out in my generation. We don't want to stand out and seem too weird. But you know what? I have bad news. If you are a Christian, you are weird! 50 years ago you were normal; now you're weird. Now some of you were weird before you became a Christian and now you're super weird! I have a friend my age who is an artistic soul. He was telling me how one of the things he likes to do is to fish out deadheads from the Ottawa River and make print art or some kind of sculpture from these floating logs. He admitted it was weird but then he said, "But I'm 50 now and I've decided to lean into my weird!"

Lean into the weird. Jesus was weird. He didn't fit in to the world around him and he attracted weird people who struggled in all sorts of ways. The early church was clearly weird. Weird enough that people noticed and either were attracted or repelled by them. Neither the popularity nor the persecutions stopped them from sharing love through helping the sick and the widowed and the oppressed but also through sharing the wonderful news of Jesus who lived and died and rose to life to give each of us life. They were not afraid to be different. They were not afraid to share, and so they grew. And the love of Jesus reached so far and wide that we somehow heard about it 2000 years later. Now it's our turn to do something with this.

Thanks be to God. Amen