

# 4th Sunday After Pentecost

June 28, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Zach Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church  
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 10:40-42

[Jesus said to the twelve:] <sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup>Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; <sup>42</sup>and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

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The kingdom of Judah was about to be attacked by King Nebuchadnezzar the II of Babylon. When that happened, Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. Many people would be killed. Many others would be captured and taken into exile. The nation of Judah would become Babylon’s slaves and serve King Nebuchadnezzar. The times ahead looked grim.

God knew this and Jeremiah his prophet knew of this impending doom for Judah. God sent Jeremiah to proclaim it to the kingdom of Judah and its people. It was a harsh truth for Judah and its people. So harsh that many other “prophets” who claimed they were from God came out and spoke against Jeremiah’s proclamation. One of them was named Hananiah. He came and proclaimed to the people of the nation of Judah that their future was that of peace and one in which would be free of Babylon. If we were part of the nation of Judah, which message would we want to believe is true?

There is a cartoon that has been circulating on social media. I’m not sure the name of the animator who created it, but the cartoon depicts a scene of people standing in line. Now there happen to be two lines, but people are only standing in one of the lines. At



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the head of the lines are two windows with signs over them. The first window has a sign over it that says: “Uncomfortable truths.” This line has no one standing in it. The other line, in which all the people in the cartoon are standing says: “Comforting lies.” This cartoon is a good illustration (yes, pun intended) of who the people of Judah wanted to believe.

The power of sin (and I am talking about universal sin here; the sin that entered the world through the fall of Adam that affects all of us) often tries to manipulate us and control us by assuring us a false sense of peace; that nothing bad will happen to us. Sin is crafty like the serpent who told Eve, “You won’t die...” when talking about the fruit on the forbidden tree in the garden of Eden. It is as crafty as King David who convinced himself that his power as king of Israel allowed him to commit adultery with Bathsheba. Sin is as crafty as Hananiah who convinced Judah there was peace when Babylon was knocking down the door. Sin is as crafty as the Pharisees and the Roman Elite who used lies to convince the people to demand Jesus’ crucifixion.

What I am seeing in our nation these days is more craftiness from sin, who has somehow convinced many of us in society that COVID-19 is no longer a threat to us. My family and I went to the beach out in Malibu a few weeks ago to celebrate my birthday. We have been wanting to go to the beach ever since we moved to California. We had hoped to take a nice walk, admiring the beautiful scenery and listen to the calming sound of the waves of the ocean. The rules of Los Angeles County were still clear that the only activities that were allowed on the beach were walking, running, swimming, and surfing. The rules also stated that we were not allowed to bring in beach chairs, umbrellas, blankets, or food. However, when we arrived at the beach, it was filled with a ton of people who were doing nothing but sunbathing, sitting in their beach chairs with their umbrellas and eating food. Most of them were not wearing masks either. Just yesterday I was in Target and I saw one gentleman walking around the store with absolutely no sign of a mask. There are people spreading false truths that wearing a mask somehow poisons you with Carbon Dioxide (which it doesn’t). Just this past Friday there was a *Pasadena News Now* article about how Los Angeles County has become the number one county in the nation for COVID-19 cases. The state of Florida just recently reported 9,000 cases of COVID-19 in one day!



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I know that it is summer, and we are all sick of the social distancing restrictions. Plus, with states easing restrictions, it has become easy for us as a society to convince ourselves that we are in the clear with this pandemic. However, the number of growing cases and deaths due to COVID-19 says otherwise. It is simply not safe yet, and that is an uncomfortable truth for us. It certainly is for me. My personality is one that thrives on physical connection and being free. This pandemic has been really hard on my mental and emotional health. I can imagine it has had the same effect on many of you as well. We want things to go back to “normal.” When our desire for such normalcy has become so strong, it is easier for us to fall under the deception of sin. After all, sin is always good at trying to win us over with selfish desires.

Thankfully, we have Jesus, and Jesus is good at helping us overcome the craftiness of sin by reminding us that our true identity is found in the fact that we and all people are God’s beloved. Jesus is there to remind us that we are free from the powers of sin because we have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. Jesus’ death on the cross once and for all time defeated the power of sin had over us. The ultimate consequence for sin is death. Through the resurrection, God showed us an unconditional love when the world committed an ultimate act of sin by killing God’s son. By raising Christ from the dead, God proclaimed to us that the consequence of sin has been taken away and replaced with eternal life, grounded in God’s love and grace. In other words, we are free from sin because we no longer have to fear an ultimate death. God has promised us that faith in Jesus Christ ties us forever into God’s family, making us heirs of the promise of resurrection.

But more than that, the daily gift of baptism, which continually washes away any bondage to sin, reminds us that, even on those days when we give into the powers of sin, we don’t have to keep living in sin because the gift of baptism has freed us once more and brought us the gift of forgiveness. It reminds us that we are free to live in a way that expresses the love of God to ourselves, our families, and all others whom we meet in daily life.

In the gospel story today, Jesus gives one last encouragement to his disciples before sending them out to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all of Israel. He reminds them that, while there will be those who will resist the good news and even threaten their lives over it, there will be those who will welcome the message and be



transformed by it. He reminds them that there will be those who will show them great love through hospitality, for they will come to understand that the true power that will change the world is God's love.

But Jesus' words to the disciples are also a good reminder to us that, proclaiming God's love can take on many forms. One of those is through the act of hospitality. Now, while it is ill advisable to host people over for dinner, or to invite strangers to take refuge in our homes right now, there are other ways we can show great hospitality as an act of God's love. When we are willing to wear our masks in public, it is a sign of God's love and an act of hospitality towards others. When we are willing to maintain social distance and follow pandemic guidelines, it is an act of love and hospitality. Finding alternative means to connect with others virtually, while not as fulfilling as connecting in person, is still an act of God's love and hospitality.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans (Romans 6:12-23), makes an argument that, now that the Roman established church has been freed in Christ through baptism, they can present their members to be used for righteousness instead of sin. Righteousness here refers not to how holy or pious a person is, but how much a person is willing to live a life grounded in God's love. When Paul talks about presenting members, he is literally talking about a person's body parts. He is basically exhorting the people of the Roman church to use their bodies, no longer as weapons to destroy, but as weapons to spread the love of God.

When we wear our masks, when we follow social distancing guidelines, when we do everything in our power to keep ourselves and others safe, we are using our bodies to promote the love of God. We are proclaiming to the world that we cherish all life and will continue to live in a way that promotes the lives of all people. These simple acts of love and hospitality will help to transform our world back into a place of true peace and safety. Yes, it continues to be a difficult road for all of us, but it is a road that proclaims the gospel and assures us the hope of everlasting life.

Amen.

