

Gospel - Mark 1: 4-11



Sermon 5.31.23

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This Sunday's lessons remind me of knots. Here at St. David's, we have a lot of knitters and crocheters. I think Judy Ogden has crocheted enough yarn to reach to the sun and back as she's sat through vestry meetings, nonprofit board meetings, Education For Ministry, Knit and Pray, Bible studies and countless other gatherings over the years.

Crocheting, knitting, embroidery, weaving, any kind of needlework creates order out of chaos. To be blunt, these activities take a straight line and make it into...well, knots. Knots that cannot be broken. Sweaters and socks and hats and blankets and, yes, fishing nets and baskets and bolts of fabric and the clothing we wear, all manner of useful things.

But first, order must be made out of the skein of yarn. Some of my fondest memories (and, I'll confess, one or two of those "Oh Mom" moments) are of helping my mother by holding both ends of a skein apart while she wound the yarn into a ball. I always wondered why they didn't just sell the yarn in a ball and save moms – and husbands, daughters and sons – a lot of time.

These crafts take patience and skill. When we first learn the craft, it can be tiring and frustrating. But in time, one develops a rhythm, and the craft becomes a way to relax, to focus that "busy" part of our minds and to then be able to listen more carefully to the proceedings around us. I always knew when my mother had her knitting out that she was ready to listen – unless she was counting stitches and then woe be to the child who interrupted!

One of my mother's early lessons as I learned to sew and knit and crochet – only one of which I now do reasonably proficiently – was that if I made a mistake I should correct it immediately rather than putting it away, because otherwise it would be too discouraging to come back to it.

It was a life lesson that I've applied over and over and over again. And today, as I work on projects like the mural in the fellowship hall, I find peace in unknitting the occasional snarl, untangling the mess and creating a straight line that I can then sew into ordered knots.

Likewise, our first lesson, the creation, speaks of creating order out of chaos. From a "formless void," God creates light and dark, sky and earth, water and land, plants and animals. Just like unwinding that skein of yarn, circle by circle. Or like untying knots, the snarl you've made of that thread or yarn, to create a straight line from which you create ordered knots, repeated to make that useful thing that is also a work of art.

On Trinity Sunday, we tie our church year up into a bow, which is, of course, a kind of knot. This Sunday, we reach back to the beginning of the Bible and contrast that with the end of Jesus' time on earth. And just like those verses from the first chapter of Genesis, the verses of our gospel order the chaos that must be running through the eleven disciples' minds.

We hear in this passage that they worshiped Jesus, but some still doubted. The gospel reading points out the 11 – the 12 disciples minus the traitor. Dale Bruner, in the second volume of his commentary on the book of Matthew, says, "The number 'eleven' limps.... The church that Jesus sends into the world is fallible, 'elevenish,' imperfect. Yet Jesus uses exactly such a church to do his perfect work.... Jesus takes this imperfect number and gives it a *perfect* vocation".

And just like a Mom or Dad providing last minute instructions to the babysitter, who's going to limp through the next few hours as a stand-in parent, Jesus shares these simple tasks with those he's leaving on earth to carry on his work: Make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded. With those three instructions, he turns their doubts into mission.

Simple, right?

And yet, 2000 years later, we're still working on these three "simple" tasks. As it turns out, there are a few more people out there than the disciples realized from their little corner of the Middle East. And who knew that religions would fragment and disintegrate and be reinterpreted and sometimes perverted and that disciples, then and now, would be persecuted for sharing the Good News?

Yet here we are, 2000 years later, still sharing that Good News, here in Mason County and across the world.

As it turns out, our baptismal covenant is a little more difficult to commit to than it sounds. Which is why we ask God's help as we make, or renew, our baptismal vows. It's a promise, made in the name of the Triune God, who reveals himself as Father, Son and Spirit. And it takes the Triune God to keep that promise.

Yet here we are, 2000 years later, still baptizing and still renewing that baptismal covenant, still recalling baptism every time we say the Nicene Creed. Still calling on Father, Son and Holy Spirit to knit us back together when we fail.

As it turns out, teaching is a little more challenging than it sounded on that fateful day. Who knew that teaching folks to obey all that Jesus commanded would lead to so many questions? So many moral dilemmas? And who knew that, then and now, we would have to teach and teach and teach again, because humans, both teacher and student, are frail and easily distracted?

Yet here we are, 2000 years later, still teaching one another, teaching new converts and long-time Church members, still whittling away at the dilemma of how to obey ALL that Jesus commanded, as Jesus asked in this gospel.

It started with Genesis, when God made order out of chaos. It started with Jesus, whom God sent to earth, Immanuel, God with us. It started with the Holy Spirit, which is in each one of us, breathing life into the Word.

And it starts with us. Every one of us, past, present and future. We are knit together. We are the embodiment of the Trinity. Like the 11 in our gospel today, we're imperfect, but willing. Again, I'm reminded of knots, specifically of the Trinity knot, born of Celtic origins, a knot with no beginning and no end, a knot which interlocks Father, Son and Spirit, which symbolizes those interlocking and unceasing attributes that we bring to our ministry yesterday, today, always.

Let's bow our heads:

Dear God, we sit before you in prayer today, in the year of the 75th anniversary of this building we lovingly call St. David's Episcopal Church. Seventy five years seems like a long time, dear God, but it is but a single stitch in the sweater of your Church. Yet as we celebrate our diamond jubilee in this dear building of yours, we recognize we've been at this for a long time, Lord, and every day, every month, every year we seek to carry out the Great Commission that You outlined in the gospel of Matthew. Knit, purl, knit, purl. Stitch after stitch, we go forth, we baptize, we teach. It is a labor of love, dear Lord.

We're still knitting, God. Sadly, we are distracted from our work and we sometimes drop a stitch, making a hole in our work that will unravel if not detected. Our threads are sometimes knotted and it takes hours to tease through the mess. Sometimes we just put it aside, hoping that time will right the wrong, but days or months or years later the snarl is still there in front of us, waiting for your patient spirit to settle in us so that we can right the wrong. Sometimes, in the untangling, we must simply tear out the work and start anew. And sometimes, as we work the yarn or thread, we find it fraying, and we must teach and teach and teach until that cord becomes strong again. We pray for patience, to keep at this task. We pray for the peace that comes with finding a rhythm to last the ages. We pray for joy, too, that which is found in seeing Your work take shape here on earth.

Thank you, dear Lord, for every one of St. David's parishioners, past, present and future. Thank you for knitting us together as a family. Together, we are stronger, making order out of chaos, creating beautiful and vital patterned knots instead of snarls. Together, we've knitted and sewed and crocheted our way to the stars and back. Together, we see

that we still have miles to go. Together, we are energized rather than discouraged by our endless journey, our journey that, like the Trinity knot, has no beginning and no end. With your help, dear God, with the help of Father, Son and Spirit, we 're still knitting the great project that is your Church.

We're still knitting, and we thank you, Lord, for your promise to be with us to the end of the ages. Because frankly, God, that's how long it's going to take.

Amen.