

Sermon June 28, 2020
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Redeemer, Ramsey

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

I want to start this morning's sermon with an image I have of graduation. I'm sitting outside on a windswept field, sitting in a plastic folding chair. I'm playing trumpet in the school band and we are all adjusting our clothespins on the music stand to keep the music pages from blowing away. We are busy playing the "pomp and circumstance" march composed by Edward Elgar, and the band director who is conducting us keeps looking over his shoulder. You see, we have to keep playing that march and repeat the main section over and over until all the graduates have finished processing in and have taken their seats. Since I was always in the band, from middle school through college, I have played in a lot of graduations. As routine as that music became for me, and as obligatory as that ritual was, when I went through my own graduations, and heard the band playing for my class, I always knew I was crossing a milestone in my life. The feelings I remember are muted excitement and hope for the future.

This year, our graduates are all on our minds because of the way their graduation plans have been disrupted by the Corona virus. In our area, schools will be able to carry on graduations in person, but still with restrictions on people attending, starting after July 6. Other ways of marking graduation have taken shape, such as on-line and zoom events, and small, staggered in-person events at school, where students can dress up in their gowns and mortar boards, and have their picture taken with their diploma. It's certainly not as fun as the normal way, but I know families are making the best of it, going with the flow, and trying to make it the most memorable milestone that they can. I do hope that for this year's graduates, even these mutated graduation ceremonies can give them that sense of excitement and expectant hope for the future that I remember from my own graduations.

I know the graduates this year have done very well to persevere in the face of these challenges. While I have felt sorry for them on the one hand, I have also admired them for the way they have adjusted to the changed circumstances. I

know they went through school expecting it to end in a certain way, and looking forward to that. And this experience they've had is correctly called a form of grief. They have indeed lost something they treasured. But I also know that despite the disappointment and grief, they have accepted the constraints and worked through their frustrations. They have come through a time of testing that very few adults can relate to in their own past experience. And this is what I think makes this class of graduates unique.

We at Redeemer are very proud of our graduates, and as is our tradition, we want to lift up their milestone moment and ask for God's blessing on their lives and their future endeavors. At the end of this service this morning, we will read their names and pray for them.

Another tradition we have at the end of our program year at Redeemer is to honor our volunteers, and so we want to do that today as well. Redeemer is a congregation with many ministries, which are run by people with many gifts. We give thanks to God that God brings together so many people, who volunteer their time and talents, so that we have Sunday School teachers, and confirmation mentors, and Assisting ministers, and readers and choir members and altar guild servers and ushers and VBS volunteers and food bank collectors and party hosts, among many other roles. Later in this service, we will also give thanks to God for them and their work, and ask God to bless them in their service.

And it is good to honor our graduates and our volunteers at the end of our program year on this particular Sunday, because the Gospel lesson for today is all about welcoming each other in the work of Christian discipleship and witness, and recalling the reward that is promised to us. Christ calls us to welcome one another in the work of the church. Christ calls our graduates and volunteers to live a life of gratitude to God and service to others, and Jesus promises that there is indeed a reward for obedience and faithfulness. We are called to live in hope, and act in our lives out of that hope, so that the world may see our witness and find God's hope for themselves.

Our Gospel lesson comes at the end of chapter 10 in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus has indicated to the 12 apostles the nature of their work and mission. There is some important background to this particular teaching on welcome and reward, and it starts back at the end of chapter 9. Jesus has already given his

great sermon on the mount, and has moved on in his ministry, traveling around the region to continue preaching and teaching, and to heal many people and cast out demons. And Jesus met with success in this mission almost everywhere he went. At the end of chapter 9, Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the crowds he encountered, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, “like sheep without a shepherd.” Out of compassion for God’s people--all of God’s children--Jesus tirelessly pursued his ministry and its goals. And the last verse of chapter 9 says that Jesus referred to this work as a harvest, and he told those around him to ask God to “send out laborers into the harvest.”

And indeed, as we read through Matthew’s Gospel account, we start to realize that Jesus never intended to do all that work himself. The beginning of chapter 10 finally announces the names of the first 12 disciples. Here, they are given specific instruction about their mission, about how to carry it out. There are instructions on how to travel, how to find places to stay and people to stay with. There are warnings about the trials and tribulations of this work of the harvest, for it is becoming painfully obvious by this stage of Matthew’s account that some people will reject their work, and they may suffer persecution for this sake of this work. Jesus warns them that the work of the kingdom may bring division, even within their own families. But they must persevere, despite rejection. They must not fear those who reject them, but they should learn to fear and love God more. Jesus insists that those who remain steadfast will be honored by him, and as Jesus says in today’s section of the chapter, they WILL receive their reward.

In a sense, although Jesus has been speaking throughout this chapter to the 12 disciples, we know from close study of Matthew’s Gospel that Matthew is also reminding his own siblings in his own church, several decades after these events, what to expect as they set out to follow in the ministry and way of Jesus. Matthew is speaking to their questions and hopes as they look out on the harvest, and he is reminding them how they will face rejection, hardship, and division, even in their own families, because of the proclamation of the Gospel. But here, in today’s text, he also reminds these new Christians of the rewards, for whoever welcomes these disciples welcomes Jesus. The reward of the prophet and the reward of the righteous go together, for in God’s eyes, their work is precious and highly valued in the kingdom. The prophets face rejection but are rewarded in heaven. Likewise, the reward of the righteous is that, as Jesus says in chapter 13, they will “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father.”

This reward system may not sound like that much fun to us in our day, and these rewards look like failure in the eyes of the world. The world around us, that we are such a part of, sees the good life as the goal--“living the dream” as we like to say. However, the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not see reward in terms of material bounty or creature comfort.

In fact, in the time of Matthew’s church, Christians were a very small minority within the larger society. For their trouble, when they proclaimed their faith, they were often met with rejection, at times hostile, and sometimes even severe persecution. Indeed, Christian faith was so new, so unknown, and so mistrusted, that those who became Christian might meet with immediate rejection on the part of their own families and neighbors. What would be the reward of the faithful, if many of them might even be killed for their faith? Jesus assures them here that though the work of the harvest will be hard, their reward will be great.

In our day, we live in the time of the sunset of Christendom in the west. Christendom is the term used by theologians and historians to refer to the long period of ascendancy that the Christian faith enjoyed from the middle of the 4th century AD until the middle of the 20th century. Generally speaking, the age of Christendom is that long period of time in Western civilization, when Christianity became the dominant religion for most people, and the institutionalized church became the primary form of religious authority for everyone in that civilization. There were other civilizations, dominated by other religions, but for most of Europe during this period, the Christian church reigned supreme. Yet the work of the harvest really never stopped. The work of the harvest became outwardly, the support of Christian missions in other lands, and inwardly, the work of reforming the church from its worst abuses.

Externally, the work of Christian mission produced a bountiful harvest, but also gave way to colonialism and its social and economic legacies. Internally, reformation in the church in Europe at first produced conflict and bloodshed, but then calmed down as the split between Protestants and Catholics became an accepted fact. Now, in our day, things have started to change during the sunset of Christendom. While the church in other lands continues to grow, in the countries where Christendom once reigned, the church is growing weaker. For the church in the west, the work of the harvest seems more daunting than ever. In fact, many

say that the situation of the church in the west is starting to look more and more like that of the earliest church, before the growth of Christendom. Fewer and fewer people in our society know anything about the Bible or the history of Christianity. More and more people are ambivalent about organized religion, and Christian faith is to many a curiosity. Once we add to that the critique that the church under Christendom perpetuated the worst in colonial injustices like slavery and the undermining of foreign societies for the sake of a rampant capitalist system, and you can see why many people today remain unattracted by the idea of becoming a Christian. People on the outside of the church see the history of conflict and the corruption, and are either ambivalent or uninterested in this mess called the Christian religion.

In this context, the call to the harvest, to serve the Gospel of Christ in all that we do and look forward to the reward of the prophets and the righteous, seems daunting. But in any case, the goal of the harvest must continue to be shaped by the person who commissioned it all in the first place. If there is any confusion about the mission of the church in our day and age, it is because we want to see our own image reflected back to us in the society around us, and not the image of the person at the center of our proclamation. If you want to know what the church is called to do in any age, at any time, and in any place, you must look at the life and death of the person who calls us to that work.

Now we look back at Jesus' words in this morning's Gospel and reread the promises of reward. If you are trying as hard as you can to align your work with the work of the master, you will be recognized for that. For whoever welcomes you when you do that work, welcomes Jesus himself. And who ever welcomes Jesus welcomes the one who sent him, God the Father. There is a single identity between the work of the Father, the work of the son, and the work of the servants who follow the Son. And to pay attention and show hospitality to those who have been called to this work in baptism, is to pay attention and show hospitality to Christ himself.

Thus the work of the church in our age must continue to focus on the person of Christ, and the presence of Christ, in the ones we are called to serve alongside of. We are to accompany with patience and grace the "little ones" that Jesus refers to in this morning's gospel reading. And we should not forget, Jesus comes to announce the forgiveness of sins, and thus the grace of God that covers our faults

and wipes away our trespasses. The church moves forward in its harvest work, repenting for its sins and failings, and asking forgiveness from those whom it has hurt or neglected in the past or present. In its harvest work, the church continues to seek reform in its own ranks and in the society it is a part of, using the standard of God's justice for that work. And it moves forward in hope, asking that God will bring us to the harvest that is to be had in this time.

In this light, we look anew on our volunteers and their work for the harvest. What do we see when we look at our Sunday school and vacation Bible school teachers, confirmation and youth leaders, mentors and nursery helpers? We see in their work the presence of Christ himself, introducing young minds and impressionable hearts to the love of God that has been poured out for the world in Jesus Christ. What do we see in the work of musicians, readers, assisting ministers, ushers, leaders of prayer, communion assistants, acolytes, altar servers; mission-project organizers, stewardship coordinators, offering counters, special event planners; quilters, gardeners, artists, bakers, cooks; prayer chain participants, visitors to the hospitalized and homebound, those who prepare funeral lunches; ministers of hospitality, cleaners, bulletin assemblers, envelope stuffers, and office helpers? What do we see but the work of Christ among us in the harvest he has given to us. Can it be better? Absolutely. Can it find a wider audience, and an improved purchase in the community around it? Absolutely. Can it be reformed to better reflect the justice and peace of God in Christ Jesus for all the world? Absolutely. Can it be coaxed out of its shell to more boldly stand for the work of reconciliation between God and all people that Jesus Christ calls his church to? Absolutely. Can we do this? Absolutely, by the help and grace of God, by following the life, death and resurrection ministry of Jesus Christ, and by trusting in the presence of the Holy Spirit, who takes our broken lives and timid witness and sanctifies them, making them holy by virtue of his gracious presence.

And why do we do this? Well besides the fact that we know Christ has called us to this work in our baptism, we also know that our young people are watching us. Dear members of Redeemer, our graduates that we lift up today, have been witnesses to your Christian living and my Christian living throughout most of their lives. These graduates that we lift up today were baptized into this faith, and ministered to and taught by me, our staff, and our volunteer mentors. We strive to do our harvest work better because they are watching. They want to know many things as they move on in their lives. They want to know that their deferred

dreams and goals still have a chance of coming true. They want to know that the global pandemic will subside. But most importantly, they want to know that the world is worth saving, that hope is worth having, and that peace and justice are worth fighting for. If we sit back in our comfortable, materially privileged perch, huddled around the dying embers of a Christendom that is on its way out, we risk losing them forever.

So let us not speak falsely now. Let us not lose our way or let our faith falter. Let us not become frozen by the shock of our current crises. Let us look to the one who called us away from sin and selfishness into the glorious light of his steadfast love. Let us not lose heart, but forever sing of the love of the Lord, and from age to age proclaim his faithfulness. Let us be persuaded that God's steadfast love is established forever, and that we and all his children stand only to gain the reward God has promised. And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.