**The Only Way Out is Through** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
First Sunday in Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Matthew 25:31-46 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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It was through the first class of a multidisciplinary Masters program at the University of Minnesota that I was able to confirm my call to ministry. In withdrawing from the program, I shared my plans for seminary with the two advising professors. Shortly before I left for McCormick, I happened to meet one of them in a lunch room on campus and we had a conversation about intellectual pursuits and faith. He said that he had always wanted to write a story about a pastor who reached the point when he preached “the truth” and then stepped away from the ministry. He didn’t say it outright but intimated that, for him, the truth was that religion is intellectually unbelievable.

When I got to Chicago, I found that folks in Hyde Park used to say that the University of Chicago Divinity School is where people went to lose their faith. Now I was down the street at Presbyterian institution so, of course, I had no worries but it is an intriguing thing, isn't it, that some have the expectation that going deeper in knowledge and practice of the Christian faith will ultimately drive us away.

“In chapter 24 [of Matthew], Jesus privately warns his disciples of dark days ahead when false prophets will arise and many will lose faith” I understand that as truth. But, in general, research tells us that people are not losing faith in Jesus; it’s the church in which they have doubt. As Scott has mentioned before, we are in what Phyllis Tickle referred to as a “500 year rummage sale.” She named this present era in the church as *The Great Emergence*, which she defines as a time when new expressions of Christianity are emerging beyond “Protestantism in all its denominational forms.”

A reviewer of the book wrote, “. . .  there are many out there that suggest that the Church should be the leader of culture, not the follower of it.” (An aside: We have tried to fight this and it’s taken a lot of our energy and it hasn’t worked) “While I understand and appreciate the sentiment, perhaps we ought to seriously consider a couple realities. Number one, that will never be the case. Church life and spiritual life will always follow technological and culturally shaped communication forms. Why? Because of number two. The church was never designed to be a cultural purveyor, but rather, a cultural interpreter. Spiritual communities exist to make sense out of what is going on around us. (Observation always precedes explanation). And the Church exists to offer the very explanations and answers to the very real questions that cultural tides pose to the soul of humanity. To try and become a leading cultural force could in some ways jeopardize the value we have to our world as “salt” and “light.”

No matter our age, none of us got to chose to be here at this inflection point. But here we are. I might, quite realistically compare it to being in the middle of a construction project. In which case, I can only say, “The only way out is through.” Staying the same is already not an option, just stopping is not an option. On the bright side, possibilities abound! The only way out is through.

I first ran into this short sentence when I was working on a mental health unit as a chaplain resident at Fairview University Hospital. We had a weekly group to talk about change and loss, an approach to emotional wellness that helps to name the multitude of feelings that are under the umbrella we call grief.

I have since found that Robert Frost is the source of the quote but there is a bit more to it: “The only way out is through and the only good way through is together. Even when circumstances separate us–in fact, especially when they do–the way through is together.”

All of us are wounded whether by loss and change or even violence to body or spirit; an illness or experiences that shake our hope. Some live in traumatized bodies, most have ancestral trauma in our DNA. Trauma to bodies and souls is increasing exponentially in our world today. There is no escape–the only way out is through–and Frost had it right, “the only good way through is together.”

And this brings us to Matthew 25 because this passage is about accountability. If we take the gospels seriously, this passage is a full-time job description of ways to pursue the well-being of our neighbors whether friends, strangers, immigrants, refugees, prisoners or enemies. Jesus made no distinction.

The singular call to feed one who is hungry is important and not to be ignored but the apocalyptic presence, the reference to the sheep and the goats in this passage reminds us that the “nations will be gathered before” God for judgment. The rhythm of tragedies in today’s text, to be hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison, represent states of being that run throughout the entire biblical witness that demonstrate the gap between God’s kin-dom and human systems of governance, control, and service. God. It is about restoration of all people to full humanity.

Empires whether, Persian, Han, Roman, Mongol, Ottoman, Spanish, Russian, or  British, (there are more but these are the top 8 according to Google) but all Empires create social strata, injustice, and the normalization of slavery. I have heard that every six days there is a country somewhere in the world that celebrates its freedom from the British Empire. We are one of those countries and July 4th is our day. The sun never set on the British Empire and all of this history is firmly embedded in the church. We are still trying to come out of that incredible global swath of colonialism and into a world community. Every generation has had a calling to delve into these depths of human depravity and go against the fears of change and loss to bear all the feelings that can bring us through into a kin-dom.

The PCUSA has begun a program named for today’s passage. Our Session has voted to make House of Hope a Matthew 25 congregation, Phil will tell you more about that shortly. Our starting point is our faith and identity as followers of The Christ – and the question of whether we as church most reflect the values and behaviors of empire or the love of Christ and the Kin-dom of God.

Martin Luther King once said, “Only a dry and dusty religion prompts a minister to extol the glories of heaven while ignoring the social conditions that cause people an earthly hell.” The only way out is through – the phrase alone brought hope to the folks hospitalized for mental illness because it acknowledged that they were in the midst of journey or a ‘way. And that there can be an ‘out’ or sense of greater wellness through their emotional work. And in group work, there is a sense of togetherness.

I believe that the world needs open, loving spaces and as a part of that I believe the church of Jesus Christ is critically important. We are not the only world religion of meaning but we have a story worth hearing and worth giving our lives to. The story is deep and broad and serves as a container for learning, growth, and comfort. It can be a crucible in times of loss, illness, and change. Phyllis Tickle’s reviewer suggests that the church has a ministry out in the world of “salt” and “light” what an interesting conversation for us to have. Just as a start, we could gather our thoughts and beliefs about humility and wisdom. As we enter Lent, I share my belief that Holy Week is the ultimate example that the only way out is through as Jesus showed unwavering commitment to his ministry of compassion and justice; this is what he expects us to follow. The call of today’s scripture is the call to be a juicy, life-giving congregation where all people feel equality and welcome. After 24 years of ordained ministry, in a broken and fearful world, I believe with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength that the way out is through and the best way through is together in the love of Christ.

Amen.