

The St. John's Pulpit

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IN THE DELIVERY ROOM OF GOD'S FUTURE

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NRSV) and Romans 8:15-25 (The Message)

Seventh Sunday in Kingdomtide, October 15, 2017

Sermon 2 of 3 in Series: 'On Being a Sent People – Exodus, Exile or Exploration?'

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You are in the delivery room of God's future as a new world is being born!

More than 2 million babies have been born on this planet since we gathered in this sanctuary last Sunday; more than 300,000 yesterday. And, although there are more than 125,000 deaths daily around the world, our global population is still increasing by more than 60 million annually.

Of course, every new life is born amidst pain and suffering. Already aware of immense suffering in today's world, as we add more persons to our human family, we increase blessings and sufferings. It can be difficult to notice all the new life while we are focused on so much agony. We know pain and suffering to be part of the human experience; yet, we have determined that masochism is unhealthy. So, we strive to avoid, diminish, alleviate and eradicate the causes of suffering. We have even named seven deadly sins as causes of suffering: gluttony, lust, greed, hubris, despair, wrath and sloth. Although humanity continues to experience suffering, we have also eliminated a tremendous amount of suffering in the world. And, when suffering cannot be averted, we seek to redeem it somehow.

At times, new life is left on our doorstep like an abandoned newborn. What if the world had places that were safe havens where people could go to give up or where they could go when they are lost or when they have made mistakes or when they have fallen flat on their face in failure or when they have been rejected, abused, abandoned or broken to be received as a gift of God and nurtured in the love of God? What if there were safe havens where people could find identity and blessing and purpose? Yes, God has sent God's people into the world to offer these 'safe havens;' **our local church is a 'safe haven.'** However, many local churches and religious organizations shame and reject people.

In North Carolina, our 'Safe Haven Law' allows babies up to 7 days old to be left with any hospital, social service agency, emergency medical center, law enforcement agency, fire station or with any "responsible adult in the state." We care for babies who are abandoned in The Old North State.

St. John's, through our history, we have expressed God's love to one another and to persons who need to experience God's love. We have welcomed, included, embraced, made room, adopted, offered a sense of belonging and brought hope and healing to human lives. We have provided safe space, given people an identity and a sense of family and offered a purpose that helps them heal the world. Over the past century, we have changed church practices, procedures and policies when we realized one of them supported exclusive walls of rejection rather than transformational bridges of gracious, accepting love.

In Romans 8, Paul describes the spiritual reality of God giving birth to the joy of new life through suffering. He compares this with mothers enduring the anguish of childbirth because of their commitment to love the new life being born. In like manner, in Christ, we look beyond our current suffering to the new life that is emerging within us, around us and beyond us.

If we only interpret these thoughts of Paul as a promised pie in the sky by and by, we miss the message of The Living Word being conveyed to us in these written words. Jesus reveals to us a God who brings new life through suffering. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was transformed into new life. And Jesus reveals that your suffering can be transformed into redemptive Ministry in Daily Life. He often said that a person appearing before him provided an opportunity for people to see God at work.

Today, after lunch, we will CONVERGE to discern where God is at work in us, in our community and in our world. We CONVERGE in the delivery room of God's future to discern where we can serve God who is bringing forth new life. We cannot throw up our hands in futility or despair in cynicism. We are the blessed people of God; sent into the world to be a people of blessing.

In Jeremiah 29, we find a letter written to the people of God living in exile. They did not want to be where they were; they wanted to go back the day when Andy Taylor was Sheriff in Mayberry. They could not see the new life God was birthing in them and around them in a new world. Called to be a people of blessing, they became focused upon themselves. They refused to turn outward to the world as a people of blessing. So, they now found themselves as a sent people in an unfamiliar land. What could they do? Jeremiah encouraged them to be God's sent people amidst their changing world. He tells them to put down roots and get involved in their cities and communities – build houses, plant gardens, eat their produce, marry, have children – and seek the welfare or shalom of the city; for as they invested in the shalom of the city, they would also experience shalom.

In a world where many people suffer, are abandoned and lost, what is your role as God's sent people? God is giving birth to a new world and you are midwives in the delivery room of God's future.

As midwives, you provide understanding and compassion; you listen; you get along; you act on behalf of the other; you care for what is often neglected; you pay attention; you focus more on the needs of the other than on your own desires; you take initiative; you provide mental, emotional and spiritual strength; you express patience; you assure that progress is being made; you offer a non-anxious presence; and you provide a maturity that makes decisions for the common good in the long-term.

God provides you with four resources to value as actively faithful midwives of God's future:

1. YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIVING GOD.

Your relationship with God is secure. Your relationship with God is not based upon you being loveable. Your relationship with God is based upon God being loving.

As midwives of God's new world, you take your secure relationship with God into a world where many people do not live in a secure relationship with God. So, while you live with a sense of internal peace and external purpose, you are a midwife of God's future alongside many people living without inner peace or external purpose. You offer a witness of God's love even when others try to cover up their sense of meaninglessness and insignificance by using power, position, prestige, manipulation, coercion, corruption and greed to control situations or control other people. They are trying to make up for their lack of a secure and vitalized relationship with God.

So, it is very important that you nurture your relationship with God every day or two through silence and prayer – being present to God's Presence – and weekly through corporate worship as you learn about God's gracious love and hope-full patience. As you do so, you nurture the security of your relationship with God.

**AS YOU VALUE AND CARE FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIVING GOD,
YOU OPEN YOUR LIFE TO BE SHAPED BY –**

2. THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S LOVE AS REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST.

Beloved, Jesus did not bring to you a system of doctrinal beliefs, political positions or moral codes. Jesus brought to you a message to love. Jesus did not say, "Take up your cause and follow me." Jesus offers you a servant lifestyle based upon the understanding that God is a humble servant: humility is God's nature. Jesus shows you a servant lifestyle based upon the message of humble love. Love of God is the soil in which God's future is planted and love of neighbor brings the harvest. Jesus taught love. Jesus lived love. You are shaped by God's message of love and sent by God into a world that needs to experience God's love. The world can be cruel, unjust, violent, prejudiced, chaotic and unfair. You are helping give birth to mercy, compassion, tenderness, understanding, justice, grace, reconciliation, peace, kindness, forgiveness, friendship, redemption, hope, encouragement, etc. Jesus revealed this message of God in a suffering world where the darkness of death on a cross is overshadowed by the light shining forth from an empty tomb. You are a midwife in the delivery room of God's future.

BUT FEAR NOT; YOU ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE TO CHANGE THE WORLD BY YOURSELF. GOD HAS PROVIDED YOU WITH A COMMUNITY OF MIDWIVES IN A GLOBAL CHURCH. AS YOU RELATE WITH THE LIVING GOD AND ALLOW YOUR LIFE TO BE SHAPED BY THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S LOVE IN CHRIST, YOU ARE STRENGTHENED BY -

3. YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

You are a member of Christ's Church. You are not merely an individual human being. You are a member of Christ's Church; you are living stones in the household of God. Yet, you live as midwives in the delivery room of God's future alongside many people who are not disciples of 'the old rugged cross;' they are disciples of rugged individualism. They mask their need to live in community with others seeking the common good. Some people are just unable to live in a community of relationships based on humility and love. As followers of Jesus, we know we are not the center of the universe. This realization is why the early Church devoted themselves to one another: praying for one another, submitting to one another, admonishing one another, encouraging one another, forgiving one another, comforting one another, serving one another, honoring one another, accepting one another and instructing one another. **The local churches of the future that thrive will be churches that create intentional laboratories of love.** St John's, let us learn how to love one another and teach one another so we experience and express love as we reach out to others in God's love. **Let us follow Jesus so our baptism is our ordination to be Ministers in Daily Life practicing active faithfulness. And, let us be an Equipping Center for Ministers in Daily Life sent forth in God's love.**

AS YOU CARE FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIVING GOD,
AS YOU ALLOW YOUR LIFE TO BE SHAPED BY THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S LOVE IN CHRIST AND AS YOU LEARN TO EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESS GOD'S LOVE AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH, YOU BECOME MINISTERS IN DAILY LIFE, STEWARDS OF ENERGIES AND RESOURCES INVESTING IN -

4. THE MISSION OF GOD AS REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST.

Beloved, you are saved from an insecure relationship with God to a life of a secure relationship with God and sent into the world as a community of love to continue God's mission as revealed in Jesus. Recently, you have renewed your efforts to be actively faithful as a servant church through our MT25 emphasis. Today, you will discern together much more than your biases, inclinations or preferences. You will CONVEGE your discernments of where God is at work in you, in our community and city and in the world. And, then, we will discern how we can be actively faithful stewards of God's resources entrusted to us as we ask, 'how can we join with God in the delivery room of God's future?'

As we move toward 2022, you should begin seeing yourselves as the charter members of St. John's second century. It is my prayer that we will be like Pastor Lee of Seoul, South Korea. His son, Eun-man, was hospitalized for 14 years due to severe physical and cognitive challenges. As Pastor Lee visited with Eun-man in the hospital, babies would crawl to Pastor Lee and sit on his lap. He learned that thousands of babies are abandoned each year in Seoul and most do not survive. Only a few babies are abandoned at the hospital. Most are left in stairwells, alleys and garbage dumpsters. He prays that no babies will be abandoned. Yet, he also prays that if one is abandoned in his part of the city, the baby will be brought to him. In 2009, he built and installed a 'Baby Box' in the outside wall of his home. So far, more than fifteen babies have been left with the Lees. This practice of Baby Boxes started more than 700 years ago in Czechoslovakia. Today, there are thousands of 'Baby Boxes' in more than 20 nations around the world – including the USA. After Eun-man died, a reporter asked Pastor Lee if his son's life had any purpose. Pastor Lee replied, *"Because Eun-man was in the hospital, we learned about this great need and are able to give these children the good lives they now enjoy. Yes, Eun-man was limited in what he could do, but God was at work through him to offer life to several other children."*

Beloved, you are in the delivery room of God's future as a new world is being born! Amen & AMEN!