

26th Sunday after the Pentecost
November 24, 2019
Northfield, MA

Scripture: Deut. 34:1-8
Mat. 28:16-20

These were Moses' last words to Israel as he stood on Mt. Nebo. He led Israel through the wilderness for forty years. The other side of the river was ahead of him, but he would not cross it. According to Matthew, these were Jesus' last words to the disciples when they returned to Galilee. Today is my last words from this pulpit. I assure you I don't have a Moses complex or see myself as Jesus. They seemed, however, apt.

I cannot tell you enough how much I have enjoyed my time with you at TCC. Most of you know my trip is 90 minutes each way between Pittsfield and here. Commuting three days a week means I spend about nine hours on the road, and it has been worth it. Admittedly, it has been tiring, but being here has been energizing.

When I initially met with the Executive Committee, I asked that a significant portion of the congregation participate in this interim process, and you did. We've done a lot together. We had five community discernment sessions in which we delved into congregational identity, Northfield concerns, history, habits, and fundraising. We read **Beyond Resistance** in order to understand the church in a post-modern era. We went through the first 15 chapters of Acts and learned that the Church is practically a miracle due to the Holy Spirit's power. And the weekly articles... I told colleagues, "I assigned homework."

I'm not sure when things started to shift, but I sense that TCC sees how change is necessary for its sustainable future. You've probably heard "missional identity" said more times in the last six months than in the past several years. Thoughts about earning rental income from

the underutilized space in the building are taking hold. Even the nebulous concept, post-modernism, no longer sounds weirdly foreign.

We know now that today's context of the local church and its community is different than the 1960s to the mid-1970s when the American mainline church was in its heyday. Then, the local church had a prominent place in the community. It was a place for civic responsibility and engagement. Church membership was an imprimatur and to be a church trustee or a deacon elevated one's standing in the wider community. Long established churches built annexes or enlarged their church houses while new churches came with every new housing development. Inside the church, the sanctuary was packed, and we measured Sunday School attendance by scores of children. Church was the center of a congregation's social life. Volunteers gave their time throughout the week performing a variety of tasks: organizing and running fundraisers, teaching Sunday School, visiting parishioners, leading Bible study. Today, not so much. Sunday worship has more empty space than people. We're ecstatic if we have five children in Sunday School and the classrooms have become storerooms for stuff we used to use and may one day possibly find a use for them again. We've dropped some fundraisers or else they're not quite as extravagant as they were a generation ago. And we lament. We lament that we aren't what we were. We lament that the number of people we once had is no more. We lament that the heyday is over.

But what if we see where the church is today not as a loss, but as preparing the ground for resurrection? Remember, Moses died on Nebo. Though he saw the Promised Land, he wasn't going to get there. Someone else was going to found a great nation. And as Christians, we can't

overlook that all of Jesus' teachings, which changed the world, probably would have faded into oblivion because he never wrote any of it down. He had to die on a cross.

As much as we love this church and all that it is presently, it will not last forever. What I learned serving here is that the church, which is the gathering of people, is ever-changing. Births and deaths. Comings and goings. Ebbs and flows. These are reassuring rhythms. However, they are internal to the church. And in the church's heyday, they were sufficient.

We're in a new era now when people feel they have no need for the church. Yet, we know the church matters. The church holds deep memories of life's celebrations and milestones. The church gives us meaning and affirmation. The church offers grace. The church celebrates and weeps with us. Quoting from the UCC Statement of Faith, "God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

We cannot freeze what is and hold it indefinitely because the church is never the same from month to month and year to year. We need to let die the belief that we can remain as we are. We need to let die the belief that people will come to us because of what we provide. We need to let die our memories of our past glory.

When we let die the belief that we can remain as we are, when we let die the belief that people will come to us, when we let die our memories of past glory, we will have new life. We are the fertile ground, but when we hold too tightly to our past, our habits, and our own perceptions of who we are and were, they are the weeds that choke new growth.

Over these months, we've been able to look at this field. Certainly, there are weeds. But weeds don't grow if the ground is not fertile. Our fertile ground is timeless teachings and commandments of Jesus. Our fertile ground is people, like yourselves, who love this church and

love to serve in the name of Christ. It is my hope that in our time together you have been able to look at TCC with a clearer eye. You see weeds that need to be pulled. You see habits and practices that need to die. You also see possibilities for your future that a year ago you didn't imagine as seeds for new life.

We need to let die the notion that this is "our church." The church was, is, and will always be God's church. We don't own it. We can't even claim it for ourselves. Like Moses who would not cross the river, we might not see what our local churches will become, but, hopefully, we have prepared the ground to support new life to serve a new generation.

Jesus spoke to the disciples in the imperative, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Essentially, he told them they had to go out into the world; the world would not come to them.

Beginning from its earliest days, the church grew because it went out into the world. Disciples spread the gospel message in which the assumptions of this world are turned on their heads. We remember in Acts that when the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers that Pentecost morning, the church was born, and it spread out from Jerusalem. Paul set sail to start churches throughout the Mediterranean basin. Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. Peter baptized Cornelius, a Roman centurion and a Gentile. I think of the words from Natalie Sleeth's anthem, "Go ye, go ye, into the world and make disciples of all the people." The gospel message is that God's kingdom, God's realm of peace and justice rooted in radical, inclusive love, is not for the end of our mortal days, but is made real in this world when we live as Jesus taught.

As the church, we have the task to make Jesus real. We are the body of Christ and thus, should incarnate Jesus so people who are not in the church know that Jesus is very much alive at TCC. Do not fear change. Do not fear because the Holy Spirit is with you. Do not fear death because resurrection is a promise.