

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Sermon: Bloom  
By Rev. Annette J. Cook  
Sunday, June 11, 2017

**A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 28:16-20.**

<sup>16</sup> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Creator and of the Redeemer and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

One night, a Dodgers minor league team coached by the legendary Tommy Lasorda was leading a Tucson team by one run in the eighth inning. But Tucson had the bases loaded with two outs and would surely win the game if the next batter got a base run or, God forbid, a home run. So Lasorda decided to give his pitcher a pep talk – a left-hander by the name of Bobby O'Brien.

Lasorda slowly walked out to the mound and said, "Bobby, if the heavens opened up right now and you could hear the voice of the Big Dodger in the sky and he said to you, 'Bobby, you're going to die and come up to heaven, and this is the last batter you're ever going to face,' how would you like the meet the Lord, getting this man out or letting him get a base hit from you?"

"I'd want to face him getting this guy, out," O'Brien replied.

"That's right," said Lasorda, "you would. Now, how do you know that after you throw the next pitch you're not going to die? This might really be the last hitter you're ever going to face and, if it is, you'll want to face the Lord getting him out."

Lasorda figured it was just about the best pep talk ever and he strutted confidently back to the dugout. O'Brien wound up and threw the pitch. The batter lined a base hit to right field, knocking in two runs.

Lasorda was beside himself. "Bobby, what happened/" he asked.

"It's like this, Skip," said O'Brien. "You had me so worried about dying I couldn't concentrate on the batter!"

**Or, in other words, if you are alive, you must live. And Jesus says, "Therefore, go."**

This scripture from the gospel of Matthew is chock-full of dense story and message. One of the things that I do in my sermon preparation is to read and re-read the scripture. Each time I ask myself, "What jumps out at me?" "What speaks to me?" "Where does this text start to make me fidget and get uncomfortable?" And then I go right to that verse and start digging.

And I found myself getting antsy as I re-read verse 17 where Matthew says that the disciples had gathered with Jesus, some worshipped, "but some doubted." Yes, that word doubt has been tugging at

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my heart all week. Look at the magnitude of doubt around us – we doubt what we read in the newspaper, we doubt what politicians say, we doubt what is true or not true, so much so that sometimes we think we just might be the crazy one in the picture. So, for about 24 hours I pondered the meaning that even in the circle of followers of Jesus, there was room for doubt.

But then I reread verse 19 where Jesus calls upon the authority of the Trinity – the three-in-one God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Well, this is good, rich stuff. So much to explore from the impossible math of three-in-one to the roles of God in our lives to the memory of your baptism from this Triune God who has blessed you and received you already into the family of God. And for the next 24 hours I pondered the way in which the Trinity of God had a grip on my life and in our worship and if today might be the day that I unpack such heady theological stuff as God the three-in-one.

But then I reread verse 20, where Jesus says “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Now there is a positive, uplifting message if ever there was one. And I know that I am standing in the need of that kind of assurance and confidence. I could tell you of the struggles I have faced this week – the struggles in work and life and the struggles of my heart and head. Granted, my problems are first world problems -- for I do not live in hunger, I do not live on the street, I am not consumed by looking for work, and I live in general safety.

Yet this week I veered toward a sadness that won't let me go. I am completely weary of the news cycle about a political leadership that seems no longer tethered to reality or justice or equality. I am deeply saddened and angry that violence rips to the core of society. I am frustrated that change is not easier and faster and more compelling.

But my sadness is also about being tired, feeling defeated, worrying that I might run out of ideas, afraid that I am not up to the work in front of me. I feel stale and stuck rather than anything close to blooming. So words of assurance from Jesus feel like a lifeline right now.

But then I reread the first two words of verse 19 where Jesus says “Therefore, go.” He says “Go and make disciples of all nations.” This verse is called the Great Commission – where Jesus commissions his followers out into the world. It's not the only time Jesus does this, after all, he has told us before about the commandment to Love God and Love One Another. But here, Jesus puts an action into motion. Therefore, Go.

And then it dawned on me, this is the same as saying “if you are alive, you must live.” And that is where my heart broke open and light shone through all of those cracks and brokenness in my soul. The Great Commission starts with living. The Great Commission starts with thriving and doing the next thing you can do.

**Or, in other words, if you are alive, you must live. And Jesus says, “Therefore, go.”**

An ancient legend tells of a king who walked into his garden one day to find almost everything withered and dying. After speaking to an oak near the gate, the king learned that the tree was troubled because he was not tall and beautiful like the pine. The pine overheard their conversation and added that she, too, was upset, for she could not bear delicious fruit like the pear tree. The pear tree heard his

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name and began to complain that he did not have the lovely odor of the spruce. And so it went throughout the entire garden.

Near the very edge of the garden grew a little daisy. As the king approached, he noticed her bright little face, full of life. "Well, little flower," said the monarch, "I'm glad to find that there is at least one happy face in my garden."

"Oh king," she said, "I know I'm little, and not many people notice me, but one day I realized that you if planted me here, you must have had a good reason. So, your majesty, I've determined to be the best little flower I can be!"

**Or, in other words, if you are alive, you must live. And Jesus says, "Therefore, go."**

Marielena Zuniga tells the story: Years ago I was in a lonely space. I was struggling for answers and life's direction but receiving little inner guidance. I decided to head to a retreat facility — a rambling Victorian house run by a religious community — by the ocean. But it was October. Off-season. And the house would be empty.

The retreat director asked if I would mind this. I said it would be fine. I needed the quiet and the space to breathe, to pray, to listen.

When I arrived, the house was everything I had hoped for. My room overlooked the ocean and it was a short walk to the sandy beach. But as evening drew on I discovered that indeed I was alone in this big, rambling house. I stayed only one night and came away with fewer answers than before.

I did learn this, however. I didn't need to travel to another location to find what I was looking for. Oh, sometimes traveling to a new locale gave me a fresh perspective and was helpful. But more often than not, I found that the answers unfolded no matter where I had planted myself.

Since I retired and dad had his stroke, my time has been filled with caring for him. But I'm also looking for direction at way past midlife, at what else I might want to do with the years I have left, with the talents and gifts I have. I still have much to contribute.

So today I had some time off from caregiving. Although it is still Spring, the weather blazed hot but beautiful like a summer's day. I went to a nearby park with a lake, and toting a lawn chair, blanket and book sat under a shady tree, soft warm breezes caressing me. Blessed silence. I hadn't felt such peace in a long time.

Then a sun-tanned man ambled by, about my age, smiling big and waved his hand in the air in a friendly arc. He had a laid-back vibe about him with his straw hat with a feather, jeans and sandals. He started chatting about the beauty of the day, about how he had cared for his mother who at 88 had still belonged to the women's bowling league, how he enjoyed music. And how in his 20s he had traipsed off to Hollywood, following a girlfriend.

"What was I thinking?" he asked with a huge grin. "We got involved in show business a bit. She did makeup and I had some background parts. You know, the guy who drives the bus or stands in the background reading the newspaper."

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Part of me was fascinated by his sharing. Another part wanted my silence back. I decided to allow whatever was happening, to happen. Finally, he said “good-bye” and I watched him walk away, wondering about his life, how he had taken another path long ago and had returned here. As I had.

I rose from the lawn chair and did as poet Mary Oliver wrote in the poem *The Summer Day*. I fell down on my knees into the deep green grass and inhaled its heady fragrance. I stretched out on the blanket, looking up at the green leaves of the tree silhouetted against a blue-blue sky.

I listened to the birds twittering around me, the hush of the breeze in the branches, and marveled at this unique perspective of seeing the world from the ground up.

I paid attention. I stretched out on the grass, I decided to follow a saying popular when I was a teenager. It would become my mantra — to bloom where I am planted.

Sometimes I am planted in uncertainty. Sometimes in the hard earth of sadness or the rich soil of joy. And sometimes I am planted in meeting a stranger who simply wants to connect. I sunk deeper into the earth. In the moment. Blooming.

**That is, if you're alive, you must live. And Jesus says, “Therefore, go.”**

A poem by Mary Oliver, “THE SUMMER DAY”

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Are you alive? Are you living? Are you going out into the world and living in full bloom? **And Jesus says, “Therefore, go.”** Amen.