

Either/Or

Today's short but intensely ironic and even laughable gospel lesson has much to teach us.

You'll recall in Matthew's gospel after the resurrection, Jesus appears to the women at the tomb.

He tells the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and there he will meet them.

Today's gospel is about that meeting.

They've gone to Galilee, to the mountain that Jesus told them about, and there he meets them.

There's only 11 because Judas the 12th has since committed suicide as a consequence of his grief — because Judas decided he could control people, places and things.

And there Jesus stands, with his congregation of 11, one fewer than a week ago, as he tells this motley crew some truly implausible things.

First, he tells them, in the face of their own doubt and uncertainty, that he's in charge of everything in heaven and on earth.

He doesn't say this while standing in the middle of the Roman Colosseum filled with spectators, nor does he announce it on a breaking news alert that might reach millions of people.

He makes this gigantic claim to his small band of followers on an out-of-the-way hilltop, in out-of-the-way Galilee.

And he tells them to go and make "interns" of all the different people in the world.

I know he uses the word "disciples", but "disciple" really means "intern."

Because "interns" are people who practice something very difficult and very important, for their whole lives.

He's sending them out to all the nations, meaning not so much China or India but to all of the strange tribes and people who are not Jewish, throughout the world.

And what are these interns to tell these strangers?

That they are to love one another.

That's it.

Because that's the singular command of Jesus, isn't it?

Love one another.

Love one another.

No wonder over the ensuing years we've come up with so many ingenious ways to avoid living out this singular command.

Depending on which denomination you belong to, you might believe that Christianity requires you not to drink coffee or smoke cigarettes or engage in committed same-sex relationships.

The lists are endless!

Because everything on these lists is so much easier to wrestle with than to simply — love one another.

Which is Jesus's singular command.

How shall these "interns of love" come into being?

Through baptism — in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Which tells us something about the nature of God.

If God is simply God the Father, unchanging, unmovable, and often times unknowable, the command that Jesus gives to his disciples will be left largely to the disciples own wits and abilities to carry out.

A distant God can't help.

Yet, just as the disciples cannot go into the world and create world peace or solve the climate crisis or end nuclear proliferation using

only their own power, nor can they turn strange people into God's interns using only their own power.

Thus they, and we, have the example of God the Son who healed and confronted and faithfully accepted death, even death on the cross, in obedience to the Father.

Jesus walked the walk so that the disciples need not rely on their own skills or insights, but rather by following the living example that Jesus provides.

This Jesus who is with us even today, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God the Holy Spirit, who speaks and moves and empowers — right now!

Which is why a fundamental tenet of the church of my birth, the Roman Catholic Church, is so troublesome.

My Roman Catholic friends insist that the deposit of faith was given to it once for all, therefore only the church can determine what is essential in matters of the faith.

It's up to the church to determine what is proper and right and what is forbidden.

This kind of thinking, although probably not intended to, often has the effect of ignoring the movement of the Spirit as it teaches us,

as we evolve, as we are capable of understanding more deeply the mysteries of God.

So things like the ordination of women, or the recognition and acceptance of committed same-sex relationships, or the fact that some people have different gender identities than the physical attributes with which they were born, all point to the Holy Spirit moving among us all.

Moving us closer and closer to that time when we may all simply and sincerely — love one another.

And in the midst of all of this is that wonderful reference in today's gospel that when Jesus came to them on that mountain top, some worship — and some doubt.

Some think that doubt is the opposite of faith.

It's not.

The opposite of faith — is certainty.

Doubt is faith's traveling companion, faith's necessary friend.

So room is made for doubt as we take up the journey of faith.

Doubt allows us to lean into God when it comes to living out the magnificent calling to be "interns for Christ."

Doubt reminds us that our own power to achieve the things that Christ commands us to achieve, to create a world in which people truly love each other, is not something that we can do on our own.

Doubt is that piece of humility that must accompany us on the walk of our faith so the journey is not misdirected by our own arrogance, fear, or anger.

And finally there is this.

A God who is three persons in one God tells us that the very nature of reality is relationship.

That relationship forms the basis for all of creation – because God's own self is, in its essential nature, relationship.

That the power of God is not found in command or violence or threats, but that the power of God is found in self giving love.

This often seems to be a fool's errand, doesn't it?

We live in a world with trillion dollar war budgets, bombs cascading at the whim of demented leaders, and threats of violence that occur in too many households – as well as in the highest offices of the land.

To suggest that we, the interns of Christ, carrying God's truth in fragile earthen vessels, can somehow overcome war budgets and bombs and violence often seems to be as laughable as it is ludicrous.

Yet here we are.

A small gathering of Christ's interns who come together every week to remember that despite all appearances to the contrary, we affirm that Jesus is indeed the one with authority over all of the Earth and all of heaven.

That love and self giving care for one another will one day, just like the resurrection, make all of creation new.

"Garrett Keizer, a minister in Vermont, tells of conducting an Easter vigil in his little church.

Only two people show up for the service, but the pastor nonetheless lights the Pascal candle and says the prayer.

'The candle sputters in the half darkness,' he writes, 'like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news: "Christ is risen!"'

He goes on:

'But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light in an old church on a Saturday evening in the spring, with the noise of the cars and their winter rusted mufflers outside.

The moment is filled with ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population, in a radically secular age.

The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme:

The Lord is with us, or — we are pathetic fools."

"So it is always with the church.

We take a fragmentary community, a fragmentary faith, a fragmentary understanding of the Trinitarian God, and we go into the world with everything Jesus has taught us.

Either the Lord is with us and all authority has been given to Christ — or we are indeed pathetic fools." FOW/A/49.

Can I have an amen?

+amen.