

Zechariah 8:10-17
Acts 2:43-47
“Saved”

January 21, 2018

Several months ago, our church moderator, at that time Dennis Aiken, stood up here on a Sunday morning and asked two questions. The first question was, “What first brought you here to Four Corners Community Chapel?” And the second, “What keep you coming back?” For some of us, we don’t have to think back too far to come up with an answer to the first question of what first brought us here. Today might be your first time here. Others of us may have to drop back 40 or 50 years to remember what first got us through the door of this place. When I heard Dennis ask this question it dawned on me almost immediately that the reason we came here at first may have had nothing do with this place or its people. That might sound a little hard to swallow but I’ve known people who got up one morning and the decision to go to church was not unlike the decision to quit smoking cigarettes. It wasn’t about deciding where you wanted to go, it was just about deciding to go. To set out and end up somewhere, anywhere, else. You wanted to be healthier and freer and something told you that going to church, like cutting out cigarettes, might help make that happen. Which brings us to Dennis’s second question: What keep you coming back?

Unless today is your first day here, this is the question that most of us have to spend time with. And I think we should. I think we should require ourselves to have to come up with an answer to this question, because without knowing why we come, it’s possible that we’ll keep coming back here week after week only to discover someday that this place and its people never held us for what we thought it did. Tell me if I’m wrong but this seems to have been the great disappointment of the disciples with Jesus in the end. Not unlike us, they were out working their Monday through Friday jobs when one day Jesus comes along and says, follow me. We’re never really told why they do—why Matthew gives up his lucrative salary as a tax collector or why Andrew and Peter leave behind not only their fishing boats and tackle boxes but their very families to go off with Jesus—but they do. Maybe they’d been smoking the same cigarettes for years, breathing in the same stale air and just looking for a real reason to quit. Jesus comes along, he’s got that starry look in his

eyes, like he's out for something, and it's all they can do not to follow him for a day. He performs a miracle, they perform a miracle. He preaches a sermon, they preach a sermon. He walks on water, they walk on water. The crowds get bigger and the applause gets louder. A day turns into a week, a week into a month, a month into a year. Then one day, just when they think they've got a handle on things, when they feel like they've made it, they notice Jesus sitting on the rug with a bunch of babies and toddlers. They tell him, "Come on Jesus, we've got to get going. We've got a kingdom to build." And Jesus tells them, "Unless you become like one of these children, there is no kingdom."

The next day the disciples tell him, "Jesus, show us God. Show us God and we will be satisfied."

Jesus tells them, "Have you been coming around this whole time and still you don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen God." Jesus picks up a cross and turns to Jerusalem, and the disciples go along, but when they get there and people start to ask them if they know Jesus, they all say, not at all.

It's important for us to ask ourselves every day why we keep coming around here, because we never know when Jesus will show up with a cross in hand and be shocked to hear us say that we don't know him.

What keeps bringing you back here? I hope you don't mind but I really like this question and I thought I'd take a crack at answering it myself this morning. My answer is quite simple. It's just four words that might actually all mean the same thing. The first word is *mystery*. Mystery keeps bringing me back. The poet Mary Oliver has written that,

*Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.
How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.*

*Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.
Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.¹*

I keep coming back to church because I have discovered that not everything in life can be reconciled and made sense of. There are times when life cracks and breaks and its pieces cannot be fit back together. As a friend once told me, picking up broken pieces means risking getting cut, and getting cut means bleeding, and remember, you can only bleed out once in your life. Sometimes when the marriage shatters, when the dream falls apart, when you shoot the stars and miss, all you can do is pile up the pieces, put them in a box, and stash them on the top shelf in the closet. Some might pull the pieces back out later and try to make something new of them, some might never. Whatever the case, it helps to have a community that isn't going to try and heal us or give answers to us but will, like Jesus, simply pick *us* up and return us to ourselves. I like what the Jesuits say, “What we seek is a compassion that stands in awe at what we have to carry, and not in judgement at how we carry it.”

In the church, when we run up against things that are mysterious, we have a word for what can be done. It is my second word for what keeps me coming back. It is, *sacrament*. When we pass around the bread and say, the body of Christ broken for you and you and you, that no one should be left out; when we pour the baptism water over the head of a baby we've just met and barely know, we are doing sacrament—celebrating the mysterious. Mysterious because it makes no earthly sense that God would love us all so equally and graciously; celebration because God does.

About 8 years ago now, when I was last in the Middle East, I attended church on a Sunday morning at an Orthodox Christian church in Beit Sahour. Beit Sahour is a Hebrew word meaning “*House of the Watchmen*.” The people of Beit Sahour are proud ancestors to those shepherds—those watchmen—of long ago who first saw the star in the sky over Bethlehem and journeyed to find the Christ child. Anyway, I was sitting in the balcony at

¹ Her poem entitled, “*Mysteries, Yes*.” Published in her book *Evidence*, p. 62; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009.

church on this particular Sunday morning with my host, a young man named Fadii. When it came time for communion, I noticed that after everyone had gone forward to receive the bread and the wine, a group of about 20 women went forward again to collect the leftover pieces of bread. They put the pieces into cloth bags and then added to the pieces 2 or 3 additional whole loaves of bread. Then, taking the bags, they walked about the sanctuary handing them out. I asked Fadii who they were giving them to.

“The poor.”

“Do the women do this every week?”

“Of course.” He said it in such a way as to make me think it wouldn’t be communion if the hungry still went away hungry.

“How do they know who should get the bread?” I wanted to know.

“Well, I guess you should always know who needs the bread.”

In writing about the earliest church, the writer of the book of Acts says that “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” What were these wonders and signs that inspired awe? A beautiful 50-person choir? No. A perfectly balanced church budget? No. Sermons that made no one fall asleep? A well-funded youth group? No, no. It was that everyone was together and kept all things in common. How remarkable. It didn’t matter if you were rich or poor, if you had a little to put in or a lot to put in. After everyone put in what they had, no one knew the difference. Didn’t matter if you were a soldier or a pacifist, a social conservative or a liberal progressive. Selling what they didn’t need, they gave the money to anyone who needed it more. Their mantra was, if it’s not good for everyone then it’s not good for anyone. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” And awe came upon everyone.

Awe and *Saved*, those are my third and fourth words for what keeps me coming back here week after week. When I was growing up I thought that being saved meant doing what I needed to do in order to make sure that when I died, I went to heaven and not to hell. That if I prayed certain prayers, behaved myself well enough, read my Bible, went to church and helped my friends and neighbors to do the same as me, then I would be saved. But then one day I read this passage from Acts as if for the first time and I saw that being saved has nothing to do with me and what I can do for myself. Nor is being saved a matter

of waiting to get some place better. Rather, being saved means participating in the reality of God's love right where I am: All who believed were together and had all things in common, and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Saved from poverty, saved from riches, saved from pride, saved from indifference, saved from our own bigotry and prejudice and judgment and self-protecting ways.

It's no wonder that the only word the writer of Acts could come up with to describe this scene in the early church was *awe*, because I reckon that's what we'd be in if we could have such a church. But I think you and I both know that the church of Jesus Christ is a far cry these days from one that has everything together. Still, I keep coming back here every week, because I want to believe like those earliest church goes that it is only when I am with you, breaking and sharing the bread of Jesus—risking hospitality—that we have any hope of ever being saved. Amen.