

# Through Closed Doors...Sent

NYTS Commencement Service

May 19, 2018

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:14

I want to first thank the NYTS Board and faculty for extending to me this honor! And I want to recognize all of the graduates for your perseverance and tremendous accomplishment!

I also send greetings from Augsburg University where I serve as Senior Fellow in the Christensen Center for Vocation. Augsburg University is a place where students not only complete an academic major but, with equal commitment, help students find their particular calling, if possible, within their major.

Greetings, too, from Leadership Foundations where I serve as chair of the global board of directors. LF works with people of faith and people of goodwill to address the needs of the city promoting God's shalom.

It was the late Robert McAfee Brown who said, "What you see depends on where you stand. What you hear depends on whom you listen to. Who you are depends on what you do with what you are given".

I want to say something about where I am coming from today: I am a Lutheran pastor and a follower of Jesus...I am a practicing Christian. And with that deep grounding which is the way I have best seen God's work in the world and in my life, I experience significant gifts from those of other faiths. The practice of others' faith continues to make important contributions to my understanding of holiness and helps me see God's activity in the world with greater clarity."

This occasion and this honor has provoked my stepping back and reflecting on my lifework and has led me to the desire to offer you some convictions born out of my work as a reflective practitioner. In fact, these convictions have driven my values and mission:

My first conviction is that I seek to define myself by my center and not my boundaries. In fact, I have spent a lifetime claiming and reclaiming my center who is Jesus the Christ who actually first claimed me through my parents' faith at my baptism before I neither knew him nor myself. Living into His promise to define my life has been both gratifying and an uneasy journey.

A Second conviction comes from a statement Earl Palmer, a Presbyterian pastor and

teacher made to me at a youth conference years ago. He said if you want to bear witness to your life and not run into the danger of proselytizing, “Remember, what goes deepest to the heart goes widest to the world.” I learned in my work with Young Life and particularly in World Vision that the more I come from my center and share with another what has been most important to me that more it incited in the other desire to come out of their center which created a rich medium for mutual learning, genuine dialogue and appreciative inquiry.

Third, conviction is that God not only loves individual persons but also loves institutions and conglomerates of institutions, which is what a city is made up of. Consequently God has a special place in his heart for the city. For I believe that God loves the city, its institutions and its people amidst our differences and in our diversity. It is a microcosm of the beauty, complexity and opportunity for God’s Shalom to be revealed.

What goes deepest to my heart is seeing the city as that critical space where we can experience God’s promise of Shalom as declared in Zechariah 8:4-5, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”

And I believe in order for this dream is to come to fruition, I am required not only to exegete the city and understand it, but also actively engage the city in bringing this vision of Shalom to reality, and what is most critical to my effectiveness will be for me to be defined by my center and not by my boundaries. I must not succumb to the pressure, the lure and seduction of outside influences to define me but must hold to my center and the calling that proceeds from it. And it is John’s commissioning of Jesus that has been particularly instrumental in my claiming and reclaiming Christ as my Center from which I receive my calling.

I have chosen today’s scripture passage because it has played a defining role in continuously renewing my sense of call at those discouraging moments in my ministry journey. My hope is that you will receive my reflections as a gift and cause for staying the course as you live out your calling. This passage is Jesus commissioning of his disciples in the Gospel of John, following Jesus’ resurrection.

There are many “commissionings” in the older and newer testaments. Matthew’s commissioning is probably best known often being referred to with the title, “The Great Commission”. And for many believers this is the only commission they can recall as though it is the only expression of Christ’s commissioning in the NT. Interestingly, that title, The Great Commission, has only been around since the turn of the last century when William Carey used it as the title of his sermon.

I believe John's commissioning is one that best fits our contemporary life today where talk comes easy but authentic action comes hard and is easily overlooked. John's commissioning unlike the synoptic gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke) finds Jesus less interested in proclamation as he is the disciples' understanding who and whose they are in their identity as primary agents of God in the establishment of God' Reign. Leslie Newbiggin declared that this commissioning in John is the commissioning of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.

And I agree! The way Christ comes to the disciples in this story reflects how I think we need Christ to come to us today. Unlike Matthew's commissioning who begins by Jesus taking the disciples to Galilee to the mountain commissioning them to proclamation, Jesus comes through closed doors to a fearful group of men and women scared to be found by the authorities, possibly to be arrested and persecuted for co-conspiracy but also for assembling together as men and women in the same room, an illegal act according to Jewish law. **And that is exactly what happened... Jesus comes to them in amidst their fear through closed doors and brings them peace.** Let's look again at the text:

v. 19 on the day following the resurrection, the first day of the week, the disciples were huddled in a house, where the doors "were locked for fear of the Jews". They were gathered in fear, filled with disappointment and disillusionment because the one whom they had given their life was defeated...even though' Mary claimed she had seen him...

And then Jesus suddenly appears, coming through the closed doors and declared to them, "Peace be with you." You see, at this point it wasn't the earthly Jesus before them but the Risen Christ, the one who not only claimed but also in fact did defeat Satan and evil and set into motion the hope of Reconciliation and a promised future that ushered in a new kingdom on earth! At this point the earthly Jesus through his Resurrection had passed over to the other side. Jesus is now the cosmic Christ coming to announce that those Disciples who had held on to the apparent fragile thread of faith were the ones with whom the risen Christ was to build his everlasting kingdom!!

John's commissioning begins with Jesus coming through the closed doors of their lives, bearing this Good News that sin, suffering and death had been defeated but even more bringing to them Shalom, peace to still their warn out souls.

What is the nature of this Peace, Shalom? God's Peace reflects wholeness of life, completeness, and readiness to act out of a forgiven confidence. That is Shalom...this kind of peace only God can give. Because it is a reflection of the selfless self-giving act of one who laid his life down and gave up his existence for the sake of us all. John says in the fifteenth chapter, "Greater love has no one than the one that lays down one's life so that another can live." It is "the Peace that surpasses all understanding."

When we pass the peace in worship service we are passing to one another God's peace that he yearns for us all to have... a gift of resurrected hope that allows the disciples to live as people of the Good News.

In vs. 20-21, to show them that he indeed is the one whom he says he is, he shows them his palms and his side so that they could visually see his identity. To know Jesus is to know his act of sacrificial giving of his life. To know Jesus is to believe in him as the **Wounded Healer**, who not only understands the disciples' fears and their pain but also lived through their fears and defeated them for all time. Through this demonstration of his wounded palms and wounded side he establishes his identity to the extent that the disciples jump for joy!!

In vs.22, He then really draws them close to him as he embraces them with such intimacy that he literally breathes into them his breath, his life Giving Spirit, the same Spirit that created the world in Genesis is now being breathed into the disciples in order that they would have the power to be a wounded healer to others. "As he has sent me, so I send you, and as he said this he breathed on them and said to them receive the Holy Spirit". Jesus did not specify where, how or what to say but rather wanted them to go freely, sent freely to bear witness to the Consecrated Word breathed into them.

And finally in vs. 23 with the receiving of the Holy Spirit he literally gives them the power to forgive others, because God's peace can only be received out of forgiveness.

It is hard for us to understand the transformational power of such Good and Freeing News that Jesus, the risen Christ, was to those disciples. But to put it into a more contemporary context, I am reminded of the story told to me by Ray Bakke, a friend, an urbanologist and theologian. It is a true story that occurred during the remaining months of WWII.

The setting is a German prisoner of war camp where there were both British and American prisoners. A barbed wire fence separated the Brits and Americans. The Germans gave each a chaplain who happened to be Scottish.

Each day the chaplains from each side would meet at the fence to share news. The Germans thought that this would help morale.

The Scottish chaplains soon discovered to their dismay that the German guards who were with them also spoke English. Being resourceful they started to talk in Gaelic and realized that the Germans could not understand them. And so they talked in Gaelic each day.

As the story goes, the Brits had been secretly working to piece together a wireless radio and would listen to the news that would then be relayed to the Americans each day at the fence. One day the Brits heard on the radio that the war was declared over

and to the astonishment of the German guards and to the Americans they jumped for joy and started celebrating.

As the chaplains shared the Good News at the fence that day the Americans also began to celebrate, hope filled the air.

Even though' the war had been won it took months before that prisoner of war camp was finally freed. For the prisoners, however, everything had changed while nothing had changed. The food was still lousy, the guards were still brutal, and the suffering and confinement and the closed fences and doors were still the same. But the power of the Good News that the war was over and had been won changed everything as well. The Good News had penetrated the closed doors and walls of that camp and given the suffering prisoners hope and energy. The suffering and hardship was the same but the way it was endured was totally different.

Jesus penetrating through the closed doors of the disciples is like the good news spreading through the prison camp, everything has changed but nothing has changed for us as well. We too can persevere and live in that same hope. Because for though this commissioning comes out of my tradition I also know from John's later letter in the Newer Testament that **love comes from God; where there is love there is God. Regardless of the tradition, where there is love there is God.** John says it this way: **Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)**

I have learned that intractable problems do not get solved, they most often get transcended. And that means I do not need to have the answers and try to fix the problem but I do need, in the midst of the intractable situation, to be present embracing in my body and life the breathe of God who alone can transcend life.

And so here you and I are today, gathered all together with all the variety and diversity so expressed. Together we are living in a world of many cultures and many religions experiencing what some sociologists call the great unraveling of our public life. That is, we know that our institutions as they are currently wired are not working but at the same time are not clear about the steps forward. Politically our two party system seems broken, as does denominationalism within our religious world.

Into this conflicted world traveling at the speed of light comes our three mile an hour God interested according to our text this morning interested not so much in what should be said but most interested in living out of who we are, sent ones who need the one sending, our Holy God, to even come through closed doors, show his hands and his side and remind of his passion, breathing in us God's very breath of creation so that we might not be emissaries of an absent landlord leader but carry in us and in

our activities the very promise and hope that though the war is still raging God's victory has been won!

What a fantastic time to be alive participating in and leading faith communities with all of the expressions found among us; knowing we can be a vehicle of transformation of life where cities will no longer be battle fields but will be playgrounds of safety and hope and shalom.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in God's Grace. Amen