

Pentecost 12A, Proper 16. August 27, 2017. Matthew 16:13-20.

I find myself increasingly saying variants of “We know how to do this. This is what we, the church, do.” Of course, I am called on to say this most often when we are not quite sure that we do know how to do what we have to do. When we’re not sure that we’re up to the task, or it seems to be a complicated job that we’ve never encountered. What I mean is that while we are facing new situations, new opportunities, new crises, things we’ve never done before, it is also true that we have the spiritual resources to face them. The virtues that are the basic fabric of our life together are exactly the virtues we need to navigate these new waters with integrity, whether those waters are political threats, personal tragedies, a changing socio-economic reality for the church, or just plain exhaustion from being spread too thin. Humility, creativity, empathy, courage, faith, forgiveness, hope—these skills that make up who we are, are what we most need.

And crucially, as often as I find myself saying “we, the church, know how to do this because it is what we do,” I also think to myself, “I have no idea what I’m doing.” Both things are true. No one of us really knows how to do these things. How to respond to the devastation in Texas; what to do about emboldened white supremacy across the country; how to respond to an early, unexpected, tragic death; how to move forward together when we disagree so strongly.

The fact that no one of us knows how to do these things that we must do means that we end up trusting the collective wisdom of the people to whom we have tied our lives. And this wisdom, the wisdom collected in this room and guided by the Holy Spirit, is much greater than what any individual here has. We are able to do impossible things with some measure of grace because we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We all benefit from the diversity of gifts that Paul listed in his letter to the Romans, and that together make up the church.

Paul lists these as prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and showing cheerful compassion. But we might add the wisdom that comes very specifically from having raised that particular child, or having been friends with that particular person, or having worked in that exact job for thirty years, or even from having suffered that specific tragedy. There are big categories of gifts in which we participate, but there are also the extremely idiosyncratic ways that each of us brings wisdom, compassion, and love to the body of Christ in a way that only each of us can. And this tapestry of diversity, forged into something coherent by our shared confession that the story of Jesus is the story of God, makes us a people against whom the gates of Hell will not prevail.

And we are often facing the gates of hell. Whether it’s the semi-private hells of a sudden death or a world-dislocating diagnosis, or the big public hells of violence and institutionalized racism that deny the God-given dignity of our brothers and sisters in this world. Of course I don’t mean that if we in this room put our heads together we could fix these problems. I mean that together we know how to respond to them. As a body, we know how to mourn, to support, to tell the truth, to convert, to recognize the signs that God is bringing life out of death and turning the night into the morning. We know how to greet the light at dawn and to tell our neighbors that the night is ending because God’s light has come and is coming into the world. We know how to do this; this is what we do.

I don’t know what it is that we will have to do next: what difficult, possibly painful, self-sacrificial, life-giving tasks we’ll find ourselves faced with. But I do know a

few things. I know that God is bringing life out of death, because that is what God does. I know that God has invited the church into this work which is often joyful and sometimes hurts. And I know that when the next thing comes, I will say, “we know how to do this.” Because God has filled this church with gifts and empowered us to respond faithfully even to the gates of hell. And I know that each of you, whether this is your first time through these doors or you’ve been here for fifty years, have unique gifts that God can put to use in this little outpost of the body of Christ on the corner of East and Adams.

We are all, as Paul says, being transformed here by the renewing work of God. And we are participating in God’s transformation of the world. Through mourning, working, celebrating, loving, believing, giving, and telling the truth we are transforming. Sure, no one of us really knows what we’re doing. But we can do this. This is what we do.