“Endurance”

Harvest Sunday
Luke 21:5-19

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From the Pulpit
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Prayer for Illumination: God of our weary years, God of our silent tears. Meet us in this place today. Open these words by the Power of your Holy Spirit that they may give us a glimpse of your kingdom coming near. Amen.

Perhaps you saw the picture on Facebook of a church sign last week that said, “Jesus is coming. Hopefully before the election.” The results of Tuesday’s presidential election might very well appear apocalyptic in the eyes of many, with exactly the kind of expected aftermath that Jesus described in our gospel lesson today.¹ If the election outcome had been different, we would have faced unrest and division and hurt as well. We hear these apocalyptic texts every year at this time as we come to the end of the church year.

Well, we are still here. Many of us in this country try to pick up the pieces after a long election cycle that has been contentious at best and at worst, has exposed the underbelly of all that we wish we could pretend did not exist in our world. Things are not ok. I can’t stand here and say that they are. News reports are full of unleashed hatred and bigotry and violence across this country and in our city.

Today, many are fearful. Many are hurting. I am sorry, this is so hard. There are new challenges for us: Children wonder if they are safe at school. Mothers and fathers wonder what to say to their kids. Women wonder about their safety when words of sexual assault seem validated. Our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, our brothers and sisters who are immigrants, African-American, Muslim, or Hispanic fear their safety and see images or hear phrases of deep seeded hatred. Days this week have been hard—even terrifying.

I know there are millions of people throughout our country who are uncertain about the future and they are scared. Deep divisions in our society have bubbled to the surface (under high and sustained election year heat), and we are more aware than we were on Monday of the significance of those divides. Sadly, this election was never going to bring an end to the deep divisions that have been sown in our country and in our world.

We need healing and wholeness in our country now more than ever. We must move forward. That is what people of faith do—move forward. Our faith is not registered with any political party, but our faith is built upon the rock that is Christ’s love and justice, and that is what guides us as Christ’s disciples.² Discipleship hasn’t changed much in the last 2000 years.

² PCUSA letter from the staff of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 2016.
Following Jesus still means testifying to our trust in God in the midst of circumstances that test our confidence and our hope. So we keep going on, with endurance as a hallmark of what it means to be a believer. We will keep witnessing to the marvelous things that the Lord has done and will continue to do (Psalm 98) regardless of the ways in which it looks otherwise. We just have to.

Just a few chapters ago in Chapter 10, we hear Jesus affirm the Greatest Commandment. ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ (Luke 10.27). It’s the greatest commandment and yet, loving neighbor doesn’t seem easy.

Remaining connected to friends through social media is easier than ever. Facebook being one of them. On Election Day alone, 115 million people generated 713 million likes, posts, comments and shares regarding what was going on with the election. They don’t have data about how many “unfriend” selections have been made during the election season or on the days that followed.

*Needless to say, there has been an “UNFriending Frenzy” going on around here since Tuesday, with people with whom we disagree. In this day and age, it is easy to dismiss those with whom we disagree. We are quick to*
dismiss...discount...unfriend. Disengage. Turn away.

To love your neighbor---means to do just the opposite of what our social media makes so easy. It means, staying in touch, reaching out, finding a shared humanity and turning toward the other. Empathize. Acknowledge. Befriend. Re-engage. Turn toward.

I’ve had many conversations this week with colleagues and parishioners who are keenly aware of the bubbles we live in. There is comfort and comradery in those bubbles. These bubbles keep us from being uncomfortable. The bubble walls keep “us and them” separate.

Bubbles prevent us from knowing the real challenges that people face. We don’t hear each other. We don’t listen to each other. Why bother? We don’t know each other. We struggle to find shared values. We don’t engage with others who are different. But, you may work with them. They may even be family members.

The bubble we set for ourselves (or that is introduced to us from a young age) prevents us from expressing empathy for another. It prevents us from knowing another as a child of
God. When that happens, we have a harder time seeing that we are a child of God too.

The passage from Luke today warns of the end times (temple destruction, war, insurrection, earthquakes, famine, plagues, arrests and persecution) and it warns us about becoming too fixated on temporary human institutions, perhaps implying that we should attend more to the poor and disenfranchised. It also encourages us to be firm in our trust in God when calamity and persecution strike. It offers imagery of destruction but ultimately, it’s a passage grounded in hope—in the hope that God remains present in the world and in one’s life even when things have gotten so bad that it feels like the world is closing in on us.³

As Christians, we are called to participate in God’s work to break down barriers and stand firmly against any rhetoric or actions that reinforce them. Peter Marty, editor of The Christian Century magazine, offered these words this week. He says, “The Gospel message has zero tolerance for bigoted speech or contempt for the weak, no taste for vile conspiracy theories that promote fear. Xenophobic sympathies have no place.”⁴

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⁴ Peter W. Marty, The Christian Century.org
The work of the Christian community is to remind people of Christ’s abundant and radical love. We are called now to work harder than ever to get this message out to the world. It’s a message that doesn’t not speak out of scarcity. It doesn’t speak out of hate. It doesn’t speak with fear and intimation. The Story of God and God’s people has always been and will always be a story of Abundant Love.

That means together we must seek a better and fairer world not just for ourselves, but for any people who feel overlooked, dismissed, or, worse, hated because of who they are. It does mean that we resist all pressure to turn away from or to turn against any of God's beloved children.\(^5\)

We, who gather in this place, covenant together to embrace Christ’s abundant radical love and testify to it in our world. It’s about discipleship and endurance—a hallmark of what it means to be a believer. Even if you don’t have words, or you are scared to share the story of your faith, we must. We must testify to God’s love for all, remembering that Christ will give us the words and wisdom we need.

I think our mission at First Church remains very clear—we are called by God, led by Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy

\(^5\) I was inspired by a congregational letter I received from the staff of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. 11/12/16
Spirit to witness to Gods’ love and justice between ourselves and throughout the world.\textsuperscript{6} I think we, as a community of faith, need to put that faith into action. We need more of you to speak out, to witness and to march for justice. Take a look at our Open and Affirming statement adopted 14 years ago. This is what we believe. It’s printed in the bulletin each week. I’ll highlight a few points that resonate for me,

\ldots We believe we are all created in God’s image, female and male, and we are called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. \ldots Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical disabilities, socioeconomic levels and political and theological backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.”

(Open and Affirming Statement, adopted September 8, 2002)

We as a church are called to speak out but also be part of the healing and repairing of the world and our relationships. Christ’s abundant radical love shows us a better way. It’s a new vision that the prophet Isaiah saw, a new heaven and new earth.

\textsuperscript{6} First Congregational Church statement of community.
How do we move forward? How can we be a source of healing and hope in this moment and in our life together? We’ll have to listen. Honestly and openly listen with those who truly have different views than we do. We’ll have to take ourselves out of our bubbles and encourage others to do the same. We’ll continue to speak out in the public sphere; that has always been our way. We’ll be called to testify to the love God has for us. This is abundant radical love. We trust in the unwavering promises of God: a grace beyond measure, a love so unconditional, and an endurance for the journey to new life. My best guess is that this new way forward will be risky. We’ll probably stumble—I’ll make mistakes along the way. We’ll need to find clarity in our voice as Christians as we listen to God and listen to others. The message is clear. Jesus is coming! In God’s new creation, words of bigotry, intimidation, fear and hatred will not prevail. But love will.

Amen.