

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9c
Isaiah 66:10-14
Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Pastor Melinda Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
July 3, 2022

It's exciting to have four new members joining the congregation today! You range from being pretty new to this fellowship to having been part of this congregation's ministry for a long time, just waiting for the right moment to come forward to declare your faith and commitment publicly.

It's a very special day. Today you say "yes" to God who first said "yes" to you in baptism. You affirm this congregation as your home base for following Christ's way of love and mission. And we the people of First Immanuel promise to support and pray for you, and partner with you.

We want to thank you for all of this! Because it gives everyone a chance to reflect with wonder on this Christian life we are living together. Fortunately we have some beautiful scriptures to help us.

Being baptized is, first of all, about belonging to God. In baptism God washes us clean with the waters of forgiveness and new life. We are marked with the cross of Christ – a sign of belonging we hold dear and remember often when we make the sign of the cross in worship. This sign means "I belong, I am loved. I am covered in God's grace, my being is anchored and centered in God's love."

In baptism God claims us as God's children – the prophet Isaiah describes this relationship so beautifully. In Isaiah God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." According to the Bible, God is our loving mother, doting on us, carrying us in her arms, dandling us on her knees -- isn't that gorgeous? God delights in us, just the way we delight in the little ones here at First Immanuel like baby Nolan or little Ettie or kids like Soren and Esprit. We're captivated by their lively faces and bright eyes, we marvel at the way they grow up, the words they learn, the experiences that lie ahead of them. God delights in us just that way, with parent-love that cherishes each one of us freely and joyfully and without condition. And here's the truly wonderful thing: no matter what age we get to be, we never grow out of being God's child. No matter what difficulties we may go through, no matter what may happen to dim our eyes that used to be so bright, no matter what we may do or fail to do, we will always belong to God. God will never abandon us. We'll always be treasured and forgiven and infinitely loved. That's the gift of baptism, and we can all say yes to that!

In fact, Jesus promised his followers that *belonging* would always be their greatest joy, the bedrock of their lives. Jesus said, as you go through life, don't rejoice in the things you're able to accomplish – even if some day you can do spectacular things like casting out demons or surviving snakes and scorpions – don't derive your sense of worth or value from any human accomplishment. Instead, *rejoice that your names are written in heaven*. God has inscribed your name in God's heart forever.

Oh, my. What could be more beautiful? *Rejoice that your names are written in heaven*. Just breathe that in. My friends, your names are written in heaven too. Your name is inscribed upon God's heart. You *belong*, from now until the age beyond all ages. May this always be your greatest joy.

Being baptized brings belonging, and it also gives us purpose and direction and meaning. As baptized children of God, we become part of a loving movement that is larger and deeper than we can ever know, and each of us has something to contribute.

In our gospel reading we hear how Jesus sent out seventy followers to share God's healing and presence in all the villages. Jesus first sent out twelve disciples, the inner circle, but now Jesus is widening the circle in what seems a rather adventurous and risky way – and one that brings remarkable joy to everyone involved.

Scholars point out that it was not only men but women too who were sent out*, all genders, all kinds of people sent to all kinds of places with one announcement: *"the kingdom of God has come near."* And how would they not just speak but embody God's reign of goodness and love? They would get to know the families in a town, live with them, listen to them, form relationships by sharing meals, and heal anyone who was sick. They would speak a blessing to each home -- "Peace to this house!" – and if there was anyone in that house who was a child of peace, someone who promoted peace, they would know it and know this was a place they could do God's work fruitfully. But whether people welcomed them or rejected them, their invitation would always be the same: *God's reign is here. God is right now bringing peace and joy and saving love to everyone. This gift is meant for you too.* (*see Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories*, Baker Academic, 2020)

I know of a congregation that was trying to rebuild its ministry, and its leaders made it a practice to read this passage from Luke at their Council meeting every month and discuss what it might mean for them. At first they didn't like to think of themselves as "lambs in the midst of wolves," but in time they came to appreciate the value of taking a gentle approach instead of an aggressive one. They began to see their mission as something very simple: sharing peace. Being people of peace in a world where peace is

scarce. They explored how sharing peace could change their life as a congregation, that is, how they related to one another. And also how they could go out from that place to be a loving and peaceable influence in their community. There are so many ways to be people of peace. Over time they came to the realization that so much of the work of the church is very simple. So much of following Jesus is simply about being human, instead of inhuman. Being human in an inhumane world.

It could be a powerful scripture study to do at First Immanuel. I don't know how the Spirit would lead us, but I do know that every baptized person has something to give, some beautiful way to be part of the reign of God. We each have many meaningful opportunities to be human, not inhuman. To be human in an inhumane world. I wonder what that looks like for each of us, and for our congregation.

This worship gathering is the place we are all *sent out* from. We come together in person and online to sing and pray and take spiritual nourishment at Christ's table. Then we are *sent out* to embody God's love and mercy, to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Last Sunday the end of our Holy Communion Prayer just stopped me in my tracks. Pastor Aaron prayed:

*Pour out, O God, your Holy Spirit upon all who are nourished at your table,
that we might become what we receive:
Christ's body, blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world.*

That last phrase went right to my heart: *Christ's body, blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world*. Because right now we are living through some really hard times, and a lot of us are feeling broken, to some degree. We are personally tired, quite a few here at church are dealing with illness or grief or trouble, our nation is divided and angry as we go into this July 4th holiday. So many of the systems we've depended on in the past seem to be broken too. They were always broken and unjust but maybe we are just now seeing this. And it can be hard to know where all of this is going.

Yet this beautiful prayer says, it's okay to be broken. In fact, it may be necessary. It doesn't make us less of a disciple, it doesn't make us unfit to do God's loving and healing work. Actually, it's unavoidable, and it opens up many opportunities. It could well be that Christ's body the Church *needs* to be broken, and able to admit its brokenness, and offer its brokenness to God -- so God can work through us to heal the broken places of this world.

Because remember, it is Christ's brokenness on the cross that has finally healed the universe through God's infinite, redeeming love. It is because Christ was fully human, oh

so very human, as well as divine, that Christ can be our savior. And through this broken, blessed, loving, peace-breathing Jesus, the reign of God has come near – and is still coming near today, continually coming near, even through us.

So today, in the strength of God's eternal love, we offer our oh so very human lives – our baptized, child-of-God, child-of-peace, forgiven and re-created lives -- to be vessels for divine healing and peace.

May God use our lives to bless others. In Jesus' name, Amen.