

ST. TIMOTHY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Signal Mountain, Tennessee

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The Rev. George L. Choyce

It's just a little three letter word, but it carries a very big meaning. In fact, this little word is so important that it is repeated by Jesus himself a total of fourteen times in the brief gospel text we just heard. Can **you** guess what the word is? The word is "you." "You" in this text is not singular, meaning one person. "You" in this text is plural to mean you all or as many of us would say here in the southern kingdom "Y'all."

So who are the plural "you" in this gospel passage? The you refers to those who believe in Jesus. So the gospel not only refers to the disciples who heard it first; it also refers to the disciples who heard it in here today - you and me are the "you." Jesus is promising that he will continue to be with you, his disciples here on earth even after he has ascended into heaven. This is possible, Jesus says because the Holy Spirit will be with you. Jesus promises, "He (the Holy Spirit) abides with you, and he will be in you."

It comes down to this: As disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is living through our lives, living through this church. That's an astounding statement. And I believe it! This is a flesh/spirit, human/divine partnership. We participate in this partnership by responding to the Holy Spirit's gentle nudging. The spirit calls deep within us to be more and more like Jesus. Together you and I continue on as his disciples today to show this hurting world no less than Jesus Christ. That's what we do as the church, the body of Christ. Our hands and feet are his hands and feet. With our feet we go out into the world. With our hands we bless, we feed, we heal, we hold those who are hurting. And hold them in humility that it is not just our hands doing the holding but the hands that were pierced by iron nails to a cross.

But there is a dreadful divide that is going on right now with the church and with how the church is viewed by some outside of the church. I have been doing some studying lately of some research that disturbs me. Many of the most recent studies about the perception of Christianity through statistical polls are saying the same thing. In summary, the polls are saying that people who do not attend church are turned off by what they perceive as the hypocritical, insensitive, and judgmental attitudes of those who attend church. (Unchristian, by Kinnaman and Lyons)

While there is no reason for me not to believe what these polls are revealing, I also know that there are those Christians who go about doing, in St. Theresa's own words, "Small things with great love." The Holy Spirit lives through people enabling them to do "small things with great love." More often than not, this is the Holy Spirit's pattern in the disciples of Jesus. More often than not it is not one individual doing something great. Christianity and celebrity do not go hand in hand. It is usually not one individual doing great things but all of us together doing "small things with great love." The result is humility because we realize that we not only need God, we need one another. Remember the "you" that Jesus addresses his disciples with is plural not singular. In humility we need one another.

In humility we leave church on Sunday to go and live out our ministries of doing "small things with great love." This takes us to the schools, office, overnight shelters and soup kitchens, to prisons, building houses, visiting the sick and lonely. Many, many, many "small things done with great love" add up in the Kingdom of God and change the world in incalculable ways. In short, you are disciples who are carrying on Jesus' ministry whether it is here at St. Timothy's or down in the Broadmoor neighborhood of New Orleans to a whole lot of places in between.

Every generation of Christians is empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on Jesus' ministry, but people often do not know what to make of it. For example, in the movie *Dead Man Walking* Susan Sarandon plays a nun whose ministry is to death row inmates and to the families of their victims. The director of the film, actor Tim Robbins, was moved by the real nun's (Sister Helen) ministry but stopped short of using Christian when trying to articulate his impression of her. He did however manage to say, "I believe in ... er ... that there are people who are on earth who live highly enlightened lives and whose lives achieve a certain level of spirituality, in connection with a force of goodness." (Amazing Grace, Kathleen Norris, p. 240) Though the Bible does not explicitly use that expression, I would claim that the "force of goodness" is the Holy Spirit working through our lives.

To go back to the text in John's gospel and to combine it now with Tim Robbins' words, this "force of goodness" is alive and well in the plural "you," the very "you" that Jesus mentions fourteen times. The Holy Spirit is alive and well in you. And birds of a feather flock together. So others moved by the same spirit are inexplicably drawn to be a part of all this. Here's a hint. That's my transition into the final part of this sermon.

Let me tell you the story of Peter. Peter was raised as a Muslim in Kenya but converted to Christianity through an Anglican priest. As a very gifted lay person, Peter ministered in Kenya and also in the Sudan in brutal and often life-threatening conditions. When he arrived in Tennessee, Peter offered his gifts for ministry to the Diocese of East Tennessee where he assisted in Kingsport to the ever-growing African Immigrant population there. Eventually he was talking with Bishop vonRosenberg about ordination.

While I was on the Standing Committee, I met Peter during his time of discernment for the priesthood. During the interview process, he displayed a gentle presence that, to this day, words

utterly fail me to adequately describe his character other than utter humility and holiness.

As a member of the Board of Examining Chaplains in this diocese, Kathryn Mathewson also met Peter to academically examine him. She saw that “look” in Peter’s eyes prior to the daunting process of cumulative, oral exams. After all, here Peter was still learning English, learning theology which is a foreign language in itself, and just trying to hold himself together in front of a group of priests titled “The Board of Examining Chaplains.” Who wouldn’t be a little intimidated? Kathryn walked over to Peter and recognizing that anguished look in his eyes, placed her hands on his shoulders and said, “I want you to know that everything is going to be alright and that you will not be alone in there. I will be your shepherd.” At that point, Peter burst into tears as did Kathryn.

Well, Peter passed the exams and was on his way to ordination at that point but the problem was that he was yet to be placed in a parish. Our diocese was on the verge of letting him interview in other places and the Diocese of Dallas wanted him badly. Tennessee just couldn’t lose to Texas now, could it? And besides that, Peter was loyal to East Tennessee and wanted to come back here. So a series of coincidences began to unravel. The church-owned house next door suddenly became available. And then Kathryn and I talked with the wardens and vestry about a crazy idea. And then, it just so happened that everyone began to grin. Peter Kanyi will begin his ministry here with us at St. Timothy’s this summer.

The “force of goodness” moves in the likes of Peter Kanyi. The “force of goodness” moved in the first disciples. The “force of goodness” moves today in you. The “force of goodness” is the Holy Spirit, the promise of Jesus that he leaves with his disciples. The Holy Spirit lives in you, and in Peter, and in me. Just think of

all the “small things” we can do together “with great love” with the Holy Spirit working through us.