Southwest Texas Synod Assembly – Sunday Worship

John 16: 25-26
[25] "I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. [26] The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you.

Theme: Called and Sent: Empowered by the Spirit.

In family systems we learn that all families have a motto. It may not be one that gets embroidered around a coat of arms, but is a short phrase that captures the central value, the guiding principle of what it means to be part of **this** family. To figure out what your family motto is just think back to phrases you constantly heard growing up in your household. In my family it was – you do what you have to do. You may not like it. You may not feel like doing it. You may not even agree with it, but you do what you have to do. So, in public, for example, you behave yourself – even if 5 minutes earlier you were screaming at your sister. You show up. You recognize it is not all about you. You are mindful of others. You do what you have to do.

That motto has served me well in many ways. It has given me the ability to persevere when things get difficult and challenging. But there is a flip side to that motto. It can also mean – don't complain. That is just the way it is. Just put up with it. At times, I find myself envious of my two-year old grandson when he has a temper tantrum. I don't care if it is cold. I'm not going to wear a coat. And I am going to plot myself down on the floor and holler until you let me wear what I want to wear. I can't tell you how many times I long to have a good loud temper tantrum – no I am not going to put up with _____. You fill in your own blank!

Sometimes I am tempted to put the gospel and the call to be the church in that blank space, as strange as that may sound! I don't want to follow the way of Jesus, to be kind and loving, courageous and compassionate. Look where it got him – crucified on a cross. What good does it do in a world that is so angry and fearful, among people who can be downright mean at times? I want to complain about how hard it is to be the church and proclaim the gospel, this very different message of love and welcome. Many congregations

are getting smaller with fewer financial resources. There are lots of conflicts within churches. We have enough problems of our own. Why do we have to be sent out into the world? There are big, complex problems out there - racism, immigration, the climate crisis! This being the body of Christ, proclaiming and living out his message is hard work. To be honest – I don't always want to do it. I want to sit down on the floor and not move until I get things my way, easy and comfortable for me. Can't I at least have a little temper tantrum?

I wonder if the disciples in Acts felt the same temptation. They have barely been able to wrap their brains around the fact that Jeus had died (actually, that he was crucified). All their hopes were pinned on him to restore the kingdom of Israel. And now he is alive again. How did that happen? What does that mean? Is he finally going do what they hoped he would do? Before they have a chance to process any of that, Jesus shows up and tells them they are to be his witnesses to the ends the of the earth. No time for temper tantrums. You are to be my witnesses – witnessing to my proclamation and teachings about the reign of God. No excuses. No complaining. Jesus simply calls and sends us **empowered by the Spirit.** It is not a matter of – just do what you have to do but what the Spirit has empowered us to do. And that is the theme of my sermon: Called and Sent – Empowered by the Spirit.

That is the key – empowered by the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who calls us into faith in Jesus – something we cannot do by our own understanding or effort. Remember Luther's explanation to the 3rd article of the Apostles' Creed? The Spirit is the one who creates and enlivens the whole church. The Spirit empowers us to hear, accept and live out our call as people of God.

Believe it or not, in high school, I would have been voted the least likely to ever have a job that involved public speaking. I was always the shy one, the middle child of three sisters, the wall flower, too timid and insecure to speak up. And yet here I am – almost forty years of public ministry in this church with a reputation for being blunt and direct! Not quite sure how that happened. Well, yes, I am. It is the Spirit at work within me.

The Spirit fills and empowers us, connecting us to Jesus and to one another. We do not live out this call to be the church, to witness to the gospel of Jesus, to go to the ends of

the earth, by ourselves. We are not called and sent out primarily as individuals who have to figure things out all on our own and then go witness to this alternative message in a world that pushes back. We do this together as community, as the body of Christ, bound to one another in the Spirit.

Now let's be honest with one another – in many ways doing it ourselves in our own way is much easier. As much as we celebrate diversity (and diversity is indeed something to celebrate as God's gift to the world), it can be challenging to truly listen to other perspectives, to take seriously other ways of doing things, to give and take, compromise as we work together to live out this call. In case you haven't figured it out – there are a lot of different opinions out there about what the church should or should not be doing, how the church should operate, when and what our witness should be. The temptation to have those temper tantrums – I just want to do it my way! – can be strong at times. There are times when I find it hard to have hope that we can actually be the church, the body of Christ. The truth is we can't which is why Jesus gave his disciples the promise of the Spirit. The Spirit, his spirit, weaves and binds us together in love, frees us from fear and anxiety, empowers us to go out into a messy, complicated, and yes, very divided world because the world needs the message we are called to proclaim to proclaim and live. The Spirit calls and sends us out for the sake of the world.

Let's be really clear about this. This call is not about us – about what we want or don't want, what we like or don't like, what is convenient, easy, comfortable. This call is about what the world needs, this world that God so loves. And the world needs our witness to the message of Christ – a message of love, of hope, of reconciliation, of life. The world needs this message, because in case you haven't noticed lately, the world is a pretty messed up place. Someone needs to speak that truth – not to be negative or pessimistic, mean or disrespectful, to add to the conflict but in order that the healing might begin. Someone has to say "the emperor has no clothes" so instead of pretending, the emperor and all those who are naked and vulnerable can get clothes.

In the draft of the ELCA social statement on Civic Life and Faith it talks about the prophetic task for those who follow Jesus. *This prophetic role includes "the obligation to*

name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people." The church lifts up the moral vision – reminding us that all human beings are created in the image of God. *This moral vision also reminds us that, contrary to the common assumptions and painful actions in civic life, all stand equally before God. . . . As a community of inclusion . . we are drawn by our civic engagement into wider inclusion and dignity for all.* That is the message this world needs to hear – this profound, powerful, transforming truth of God. That is our witness. That is why we are called and sent.

That is the truth that brings about salvation, redemption, healing and life. The Spirit, God's Spirit, continues to blow and blow mightily through Christ's body, just as the Spirit blew mightily through Jesus, raising him, raising us up to new life. We cannot stop God's life-giving love any more than we can stop the wind from blowing. The wind of the Spirit is what calls us. The wind of the Spirit is what sends us.

So, we can have our occasional temper tantrums. Actually, wailing and lamenting is not such a bad thing to do once in a while. We can complain and come up with all kinds of excuses and there are plenty! We pull in ourselves, try not to rock the boat, see how long we can pretend that everything is just fine. Or we can take a breath – a deep breath of the Spirit – let it fill every fiber of our beings, every connection within community, every space and corner of this world – and live this call of Jesus, sent out into the world to witness to this incredible reality – the restoration, not of our individual kingdoms, but of the world. Amen