

“With All Our Breath and Sinew”

Matthew 22:34-40; Ezekiel 37:1-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 29, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find new life as the Body of Christ with your Spirit uniting us together. In Jesus' name, Amen.

God is so many things. God is so many things and even the connections between all those things. I say this because I was thinking about the genesis of this sermon, and it led me to contemplate how the Holy Spirit works in my ministry and how intimately intertwined that Spirit's work is with what we call the capital W Word, which we most often connect with Jesus, rather than the Holy Spirit. A huge part of what I do as a pastor involves communication, and most of that involves words. And I often can only explain how those words arrive by identifying them as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's like the presence of the Living Word – Jesus Christ – is facilitated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. God is both the words and the capacity that puts the words together. Among so many other things.

I was thinking about this because of how the two scripture passages we just heard happened to become our lessons for today. The Matthew verses are from today's lectionary gospel passage, so that one isn't that mysterious. Except that we also have the benefit of just having had a Regional Gathering focused on those same verses. What is unexpected is how that lectionary option combines so effectively with what was a decidedly non-lectionary option. I chose to use the Ezekiel passage in

order to give more context for our choir anthem. Deborah had us singing it because Tuesday is Halloween, not because Ezekiel was in the lectionary. This passage usually only gets read during Lent, and it's pretty much the only part of Ezekiel that makes it into the lectionary at all. Given that Ezekiel is full of long passages about trippy visions, it's not that surprising the designers of the lectionary mostly avoid it.

This is all a long way to say that I often experience the Holy Spirit connecting things together that I might not have seen as related, but then I discover that the combinations I've been given bear more fruit than I ever could have imagined. So perhaps you would like for me to get to the fruit part now!

Let's look first at the verses from Matthew, which are highly familiar, even if we are a bit fuzzy about which gospel includes which aspects of our being. Today we had heart, soul, and mind. Matthew leaves out strength, which Mark and Luke include. Regardless, we understand that the point is to love God with our entire being. When I first saw the promotional materials for our Regional Gathering, though, sharing the theme "With All," I didn't even realize it was referencing this scripture. I assumed it meant "with all" the various constituencies of our Regional Church, maybe leaning on I Corinthians 12 or something like that. It wasn't till I looked into it more deeply that I realized it wasn't about all the people, but all the parts of who we are as people, called to love God. Perhaps those two interpretations aren't that far apart, as we'll look into in a moment. Once we got to Fullerton earlier this month, the command to love God "with all" that we are was well integrated into

the worship and learning and fellowship. Our Regional church wants us to be whole people, healthy and holy in body, mind, and spirit. The new Executive Director of Disciples Seminary Foundation, my good friend Dr. Christy Newton, led us in a meditation that morning that helped us connect to all the various parts of ourselves, as a way of gathering together as a Region.

We see that gathering together happening in a rather different way in the story we read from Ezekiel. The prophet describes his situation with such drama. Can you imagine having a conversation with God in which you are repeatedly addressed as capital M “Mortal”? God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel can only stammer, “O Lord GOD, you know.” And then there is the rattling. Can you imagine the noise those bones made? “Bone to its bone,” it says. How does the toe bone find the foot bone, and then the foot bone finds the ankle bone, and then the leg bone, and so on? There must have been a lot of bones bumping into other bones as they all got aligned properly.

And did you notice how those bones got connected? The song didn’t mention it, but the passage from Ezekiel does. Bone can’t actually hold onto one another on their own. It’s the sinews that make it happen. Sinews are what we would call ligaments and tendons. They are what hold those bones together and attach the flesh that comes next. And honestly, I think they are one of the most important body part metaphors for the church in our age. But hold that thought for just a moment,

because there's one more moment of drama we have to note in Ezekiel before we get to combining this story with Matthew.

God had started out by telling Ezekiel to tell the bones that God was going to put breath within them. Breath is actually mentioned at the beginning and the end of that prophecy. But after Ezekiel has said what he was commanded to say to the bones, the breath still hasn't arrived. There is something different about the breath, something that requires a bit of extra effort. And so God tells Ezekiel how to try another way, by prophesying to the four winds and telling them to come enter into the almost-revived bodies that have been raised up from the bones. And it works! "The breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

And what does God say about that multitude? God names them "the whole house of Israel," who are saying, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost." And here is an important point. That multitude is not just persons; it's a people. Because of the way our culture continually pushes us to view life through an individualistic lens, we mostly want to see this passage as telling us that God can put each of us back together again. But what if we were to interpret this passage looking for what it can say to us as the Body of Christ, as the congregation of Vista La Mesa Christian Church, as a whole, rather than a collection of individuals?

Let's take those sinews and that breath, essential parts of the Body of Christ, and wander back to the verses from Matthew. There are moments when it feels like

the life of the church in 2023 is entirely dried up, and we feel like our hope is lost. What would happen if we asked Jesus what the most important thing for us to do is? Because that's another way to talk about "the greatest commandment." I think if we were to earnestly ask Jesus what the most important thing for us to do is in this moment, when we're discouraged by lagging participation, Jesus would give us the same answer he gave that tricky lawyer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." And dare I say, Ezekiel's breath and sinews are part of how we do that. I want to prophesy to you this morning, church. Hear the word of the Lord: the breath shall come into you, into us, when we open ourselves to believing that we can live by the power of the Holy Spirit among us and within us. Hear the word of the Lord: God has given us sinews with which to connect the various parts of the Body of Christ. Those sinews look like texts and emails and phone calls and rides to the doctor and talking to people at church besides the ones we usually talk to and letting people know we miss them when they're not here and extending the benefit of the doubt when folks are absent instead of assuming they're moving on and persisting in relationship even when we feel a little self-conscious about it and making the extra effort to go to lunch or dinner with someone. These sinews are what hold the church together. They are a crucial part of loving our neighbors. And they only work if the breath is also present, but they also only work if we keep them strong and flexible. Can these bones live, mortals? I believe they can. I believe God has something in

store for the bones of Vista La Mesa Christian Church. Maybe our sinews are a bit tight and a bit sore from neglect. Maybe we've grown a bit short of breath, having not devoted as much time to prayer and communion as we need. But I prophesy to you, O church, that the Body of Christ is resilient and always ready for resurrection. Are we ready to be brought up from our graves? Are we open to living as the people of God in a broken world, seeking wholeness in the face of death and destruction, offering compassion and mercy in the wake of tragedy, working for justice in the midst of corruption, cynicism and apathy? Are we up for loving God with every aspect of our being, welcoming the breath of the Holy Spirit that gives us life, and strengthening the sinews that hold us together as the Body of Christ? "You shall live, says the LORD." Hallelujah and Amen.