

Sermon – Sunday May 29, 2022

Rev. Randi

The two men in white robes asked the disciples, “Why do you stand looking up into the heavens?” Today, our question is, “Why do we sit in the pews looking up to the heavens for God to bring about the kingdom of God in the world?”

We know Jesus is coming again. We know the importance of prayer. Depending upon God for strength is a good thing. But, sometimes, we are like the disciples. We keep asking when God is going to bring about the Kingdom. Yet God tells us not to focus so much on expecting God to bring about the Kingdom. We are called to be witnesses to God’s love and forgiveness in the world. We’ve got a responsibility for bringing about the changes we seek.

Jesus’s call to be witnesses to what Jesus has done in Luke and Acts reminds us of the last verses of Matthew. Jesus’s final words in Matthew also are to be witnesses for him first in Judea and then in other parts of the world. Last words are important. Both Gospels record Jesus’s last words similarly. Now that Jesus no longer walks the earth, we are called to witness all He did and taught. Luke and Matthew differ, however, in what they believe we should emphasize in our witness. Matthew was all about proving Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews had been looking for. Luke, which is our emphasis this lectionary year, believed the most important aspect of Jesus’s ministry was to care for the poor, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed. So Luke stresses Jesus’s message of forgiveness and redemption. The word for forgiveness in Greek is a term for liberation from captivity or from debt. Luke’s theology is that for us to be forgiven from our obligations and liberated from those things that hold us captive, we must seek liberation for others from whatever holds them captive –addictions, poverty, oppression, illness, grief, and discrimination. Luke interprets Jesus as saying that we are called to help bring about the Kingdom of God on earth by doing whatever we can to alleviate suffering and injustice in the world.

Suffering is very prevalent in the world today. We don’t have to look far to find it. In just a few weeks, we’ve seen and heard about two major mass shootings – one in Buffalo and another in Texas. In fact, 27 school shootings have taken place so far this year, according to [National Public Radio](#). Shootings, however, are just part of the suffering today.

Diseases and addictions also cause suffering. More than 1 million people have died of the coronavirus in the United States, a little more than 68,000 in New York, and about 900 in Niagara County. These deaths have left many grieving and hurting. [Deaths](#) from drugs, alcohol, and suicide increased by more than 20 percent in 2020, up to about 187,000 people nationwide. The [National Institutes of Health](#) estimates that about 610,000 people will die of cancer this year, and about [869,000](#) die of cardiovascular disease each year.

Finally, social problems such as poverty and income and racial inequality also cause suffering. An article in [the American Journal of Public Health](#) discovered that, in one

year alone, 245,000 deaths were attributable to education inequities or low education, 176,000 to racial segregation, 162,000 to low social support, and 133,000 to individual poverty, 119,000 to income inequality, and 39,000 to area-wide poverty.

We could think of other examples of things that hold people captive or suffering from which others need deliverance. We are faithful about praying to God to help alleviate this suffering. However, in Jesus's last words before His ascension into heaven, we are called to do what we can to end this captivity.

Most of us aren't scientists who can find a cure for addictions or other diseases. However, we can encourage those who are. We can encourage young people to pursue careers that do this. We can give to charities that help people live with diseases or search for a cure.

We can also help alleviate suffering resulting from the death of breadwinners or disability, or income inequities. We can give to outreach projects such as Adopted Families or Hunger Sunday or the blessing box at St. Peter's, or the discretionary fund. We can work at the food bank, tutor an educationally disadvantaged child, or become a Big Brother or Big Sister. We can support programs that build or repair homes for the economically disadvantaged or efforts that improve conditions in neighborhoods where poverty is keenest. Perhaps we are called to be advocates for the poor or for peaceful resolution of conflict. Maybe we are called to be conflict mediators.

We can spend time with our friends who have lost or are losing loved ones to diseases or addictions. We can volunteer to run errands or cook meals.

The number of things we can do to help free people from captivity and suffering is endless. We may already do many of these things. Jesus's call is to make these actions the primary mission of our lives. Jesus's call is also to act in His name. Helping others in Jesus's name distinguishes us from being just a charity to being followers of Jesus. We don't beat people over the head and encourage them to convert and be Christians. But we do what we do with an attitude of loving others because they, like us, are created in the image of God and have Christ within them.

Praying and looking to Jesus to help us is a good thing. But sitting around looking to God to fix the world isn't living into our calling. We are called to loosen the bonds of captivity for others. We are called to be the change we want to see.