

Rev. Lacey Hunter
May 17, 2020, Faith Formation Sunday
“These Are Formational Times”
John 21:4-17
The Community Church of Sebastopol

Many blessings to you all on this Faith Formation Sunday. Today we take a moment to celebrate all that we have learned as a community over the past year and reflect on all that has formed us and continues to form us as disciples of Christ. And it has been a formational year, beloveds. I began serving with you as your Minister of Faith Formation in August and in this time we have lived through fire season together, we have prayed with our teachers as they went on strike, we have tended to one another in the midst of devastating presidential impeachment proceedings and anxiety producing political campaigns. And today we are sheltering-in-place while a global pandemic reveals just how deeply interconnected our lives are and how greatly we need to change our world so that all of God’s beloveds can live and thrive. These are formational times. They are shaping us. We are being molded, influenced, forged, changed. These are experiences that expand and challenge our understandings, call us into our bodies and shape our spirits for the transformational work of co-creating God’s kin-dom on earth. These are formational times.

On this 6th Sunday of Easter, in this formational time, we find ourselves on the beach with the resurrected Christ and the disciples. I want to begin by saying that I believe Jesus uses repetition as a formational tool. Whether in life or in resurrection, Jesus repeats his teachings again and again until they sink into the disciples’ bodies and become for them, a guiding light, a way of living.

Today on the beach, Simon Peter is among the gathered disciples. Remember Peter? Peter was the one at the last supper who first refused Jesus when Jesus knelt down to wash Peter’s feet. But Jesus knew that to form disciples, he had to model discipleship, he had to embody his teachings. Jesus knew that to form God’s kin-dom where all would flourish, he had to model power that was rooted in service alongside one another. Jesus knew that to live from this power, the disciples needed to know this power in their bodies. So he washed Simon Peter’s feet, and repeated this ritual with each of the disciples until it was a knowing that lived in them.

Just as Jesus broke bread with the disciples at the last supper saying, “Do this in remembrance of me,” now the resurrected Christ invites the disciples to a meal and says, “Feed my lambs.”

Just as Jesus washed the feet of the disciples at the last supper and said, “Serve my people,” now the resurrected Christ gathers the disciples for a meal and says, “Tend my sheep.”

Just as Jesus opened the table wide for all to be nourished, now the resurrected Christ prepares a meal with the disciples and says, “Feed my sheep.”

Time and time again, in life and in resurrection, Jesus gathers the people together, feeds them and invites them to do likewise. All along the way, Jesus has been preparing, has been forming the disciples to be a people who care for one another, a people who know communion in their bodies. For the disciples, these were formational times.

I remember the moment I realized what formation means to me. It was the winter of 2014. The announcement had just come out that the officer who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson would not be indicted. I was living in the guesthouse of a small Catholic Benedictine monastery in Berkeley. We were in the season of Advent, the season of longing for the coming of Christ, and each night I remember laments rising up within me—How long God? How long will we pray the coming of you kin-dom while your beloveds continue to die at the hands of injustice? I remember receiving communion night after night, asking myself the question, “Does any of this mean anything?” And then we learned that the officers who killed Eric Garner would also not be indicted, and we took to the streets. On one particular night in early December, there were thousands of us marching through Berkeley and Oakland, demanding Justice for Black Lives. We marched for miles, weaving around police barricades, the sounds of police helicopters above. After several hours some 200 of us were faced with lines of police on all sides. I remember singing Amazing Grace when the police batons were pulled out. I remember rubber bullets whizzing around us and realizing we were trapped.

When I look back I have the feeling that in that moment we all drew from our deeply formed places, from the trainings, the knowings that reside deep in our bones and cells. At what could have been a violent breaking point, the line of riot police so distinct against the group of protestors, something like the spirit’s breath moved through and we took a step back to regroup from the weapons drawn on us. I was standing in a circle of other clergy colleagues as the prayers and practice of so many evening communion services came rushing back to me. Prayers and practices of how Jesus brought together unexpected people to collectively make a way out of no way. Prayers and practices of fierce vulnerability, of people moving from their belovedness even in the face of certain violence. Prayers of God’s kin-dom not yet formed, and God’s kin-dom breaking in. Pulling out a bottle of water and a bag of almonds, the only food I had on me, I asked if anyone wanted to take communion. Some other folks came over and asked if they could join. Another person approached us and asked, “Can someone lead us in song?” And so together we sang. For several more hours we faced the line of police, and while they arrested us, zip tied our wrists and loaded us onto buses, we continued singing the names of those who had been killed and singing visions of a new world. These were formational times.

I had not intended to serve communion that night, but communion had become for me, something of a muscle memory. All those nights at vespers had trained me, formed me. Communion had seeped into my body, had become a kind of reflex, an instinctual knowing that in the terror and the chaos of that moment, long before my mind could make sense of anything, my body and spirit responded with. This experience compelled me in a new way to ask the question, “How am I/are we formed as a people and for what?”

For me to have served communion during this Black Lives Matter protest means an ongoing commitment to understand and undo the ways white supremacy has formed me and the world we live in, because another way is possible. To be formed by communion means to honor the sacredness and worth of all bodies and to remember the lives and bodies that suffer state violence. To be formed by communion means to disrupt this violence and rehearse the kin-dom of God coming into our midst. Through practice, communion can sink into our bodies and rise up as a

freedom song. It is why I so strongly believe in the ministries of faith formation that we engage with together as a community.

I believe that when Godly Play invites our children week after week, to wonder and delight in the scriptures, we are forming people who can wonder and delight in the world. People who aren't afraid to ask the hard questions. People who listen to the wisdom of our ancestral stories and imagine new ways forward, just as the disciples were being formed on the road to Emmaus, when their hearts were warmed by the prophetic stories Jesus was retelling them. These are formational times.

I believe that when we practice breathing as a congregation, day after day, we are forming new pathways to connect to the divine spirit that dwells within us and all around us, just as Jesus breathed the power of the Holy Spirit into Doubting Thomas and Thomas opened to the possibility of resurrection. These are formational times.

I believe that when we engage in prayerful discernment and conversation about how and why we do service work, we are forming our whole beings for the work of communion, for becoming the body of Christ in the world, just as Jesus gathered the disciples time and time again for a meal and said, "Tend to one another. Serve one another. Feed one another." These are formational times.

Day after day, we show up as a community to be formed as disciples of Christ. Everything that we do forms us. This is what we reflect on and celebrate on Faith Formation Sunday. From Godly Play to Adult Bible Study, from Our Whole Lives to Sunday worship, from youth group gatherings to leadership council meetings, from youth and adult Service and Learning Together Trips to church bylaws and budgets, all of these say something about who we believe God to be and what world we want to be a part of creating. You can encounter some Faith Formation participant reflections in the Offering of Gratitude video that is part of this worship service.

What has formed you and us as a church? What lives in your/our body and rises up as a song? What knowings do you/we turn to in crisis? What knowings serve the vision of God's kin-dom that we are called to and what knowings are you/we ready to let go of so that a new day is possible? What scriptures help us tell the story of our unfolding? What traditions mark our way and what rituals open up in us a new way?

We are formed by all kinds of societal forces. We are formed by economies, and systems, and governments and today, in the time of COVID, our economy, our systems, our governments are facing a world that we have never known before. How is our faith formation helping prepare us to imagine a world of flourishing for all such that we have never known before? There is no better time than now, beloveds, to take up Christ's repeated call, "Tend to one another. Serve one another. Feed one another." There is no better time to go about the daily formational work of creating God's kin-dom, because these are formational times. May it be so. Amen.