**Preaching Notes for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C (April 17, 2016)**

**Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser**

**[John 10:22-30](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=136" \l "gospel_reading)**

What makes you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God, your personal Savior? What makes you believe so much that you have become one of his disciples? What makes you believe so much that you want to tell others about him so they will follow him too?

There is no single, right answer to this question. Furthermore, this is a question that each one of us must answer for ourselves. We must answer it not only with words, but with actions. Because if we do believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, we have to not only say it and tell others, but we have to live out that confession of faith with our whole lives. Because just as Jesus testified to his identity by the way he lived his life, so must we testify to our faith in him by the way we live our lives.

*Again, I think this is an excellent time to tell a story about someone you have personally known whose very life testified to his or her faith in Jesus Christ. Below in my notes on Acts, you will find a story about my Great Aunt Elsie. Perhaps reading it can spark a story of your own to tell, or maybe you don’t need anything further because you know exactly who you can talk about here.*

The Easter Season is an excellent time for you and members of your congregation to give witness to faith in Jesus Christ. It is a time to share stories of the saints who have walked before us, those whose lives have borne witness to their deep and abiding faith and whose loving actions have taught us how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We are Jesus’ people and the sheep of his pasture. No longer do we live according to our own passions and desires, but each of us has died to his or her old self and has been reborn as a member of Christ's body. And now, all together, as one body in Christ, we carry out his mission and ministry in the world. We have taken on his great commission to go out and make disciples of the whole world, and we have taken to heart his command whereby the world recognizes us as his disciples; namely, that we love one another.

Let us not forget who makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside the still waters and restores our souls. Let us not forget that it is truly the Lord who is our shepherd, and that we should not wait until we are ready to be put in our graves to let those words be recited over our names.

Jesus is the Lord.

Jesus is the good shepherd.

It is God who has made us and not we ourselves.

**[Acts 9:36-43](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=136" \l "hebrew_reading)**

**Week 4 in Easter Series 2016**

**Key Word: *Serve***

**(See page 11 in “**[**Easter Series 2016: A Focus on Our Baptismal Vows and the Book of Acts”)**](http://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worship-lectionary-planning-helps-c/Study-Guide_EasterSeries-on-Acts-YearC2016.pdf)

Last week, we ended by talking about our vow to serve the Lord. This week, we will spend a little more time thinking about what that looks like as we consider another vow in our baptismal covenant:

“To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace,

and promise to serve him as their Lord.”

In the notes [from a week ago](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/preaching-notes-for-the-third-sunday-of-easter-sunday-year-c-2016) I explained how, when I was a teenager, I noticed that some of my Christian friends from other denominations had a different understanding of conversion. For them, conversion happened in the moment when people realized that through Jesus Christ their sins were forgiven. Coming to this belief meant that because of what Jesus did for them on the cross, from that time forward, they were set free from their sins and promised eternal life in heaven. Their future was secure, no matter what else happened.

Of course, in these other denominational belief systems, the idea is that once a person has an experience like this, he or she will live in a different way. Ideally, a person who has been saved should “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Like Paul on the road to Damascus, once we encounter Jesus Christ, our lives should be completely changed. When we are born again by water and the spirit, we become new people, enabled by the grace of God to live into our call to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But the reality is, we all know that it is impossible for most of us to be without sin. It is deep within our humanity to “sin and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

When candidates in The United Methodist Church are approved for ordination, they must, as one of the final steps in the process, stand before the bishop and the annual conference and answer the historical questions that John Wesley asked of his preachers:

* Have you faith in Christ?
* Are you going on to perfection?
* Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
* Are you earnestly striving after it?

Part of the reason John Wesley asked these questions was that he believed it was possible to be made perfect in love in this life. But one had to work at it all the time, for the rest of one’s life. The Wesleys developed a program for Methodists to use in striving for Christian perfection, which we talked about last week: accountable discipleship through the regular practice of class meetings. Through these meetings, people could actively work together on practicing the means of grace to become more holy as they lived as disciples of Jesus Christ.

*At this point in the sermon, it would be great to tell a story about someone you have personally known who, through the practice of the Methodist way, exhibited holiness of heart and mind in living. I will share a story from my own life as an example.*

My Great Aunt Elsie was a true Methodist in her practice of the faith. Aunt Elsie, my grandmother Clara, and their other sisters and brothers grew up in a small town in eastern Nebraska in the early 1900s. Their father owned the local mercantile, which served the entire county and provided everything from staple food items to cloth to farm equipment. The family practiced their faith in their local Methodist church. It was there that they learned the basics of Methodist piety that would shape them for their entire lives. They learned the practices of private and family prayer from their church. They learned the value of tithing. They learned to fast, to search the Scriptures, and to attend worship every Sunday. They learned to practice accountable discipleship. They learned to do no harm, to do good, and to attend to all the ordinances of God.

My grandmother Clara and her sister Elsie both felt called to attend school to become deaconesses in the Methodist Church. In school, my grandmother Clara met her future husband, Ross, who was training to be a Methodist minister. Elsie felt called to serve in the mission field. And so, in her twenties, Elsie was sent into foreign service through the Methodist Church to serve as a missionary in China. She served in China until she was called to return home because of increasing unrest and civil war as the Chinese Communist Party began to seize control of the country shortly after the end of World War II.

When Elsie returned to the United States, she found that because so many men had died in the war, there was a shortage of men available to serve in the smaller churches of western Nebraska. And so, even though the Methodist Church was not yet ordaining women, my Great Aunt Elsie was recruited by the Nebraska Conference to serve as a local pastor at a circuit of small, rural Methodist churches in the late 1940s and early 50s.

Although I never heard her preach, I imagine that my Great Aunt Elsie was a fire-and-brimstone kind of preacher. She had a very strong and clear understanding of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It meant, for her, strictly adhering to holiness in every part of her life. She was very disciplined about the way she lived her life, always seeking to keep a balance between caring for self and caring for others in all that she did. My grandmother and my Great Aunt Elsie taught me to get on my knees and pray for a long time, out loud, before going to sleep. Great Aunt Elsie taught me how to use the *Upper Room Daily Devotional* in family prayer time. It was Great Aunt Elsie who taught me never to eat a meal without giving thanks first. And it was Great Aunt Elsie who showed me by example that a woman could be a missionary or a preacher or whatever else God called her to be.

My Great Aunt Elsie never married. She devoted her entire life to serving Jesus Christ in all that she was and did. I am so grateful for her witness, because she showed me that being a follower of Jesus was not about a one-time moment of conversion, but a lifetime spent in disciplined, intentional action.

I will never be the kind of Christian my Great Aunt Elsie was. But I am glad to have her as an example of what I might strive to be. And I hope that in some way, my life can and will be an example for others. While I don’t expect to reach perfect love in this life, I believe it is possible, so I will keep striving toward it -- as Great Aunt Elsie did. And I do know that I will reach it one day; and on that day, I will join her and my grandmother and grandfather and all the saints who have gone before me to become part of that great cloud of witnesses that lives forevermore in the kingdom of heaven.

How do we put our whole trust in the grace shown in Jesus Christ? By serving him in all that we do for all the days of our lives.

**[Revelation 7:9-17](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=136" \l "epistle_reading)**

We who follow Jesus understand that being a disciple does not protect us from the harsh realities of the world in which we live. We are part of THIS world and we are called not to abandon it, but to transform it into the kind of world God envisions for all of God’s creatures. When I read this passage, it reminds me of how much a comfort it is to be in the presence of other followers each week when I attend Sunday school and worship at my local church. When I am there each Lord’s day, I feel the power of the vision John describes when I gather with the good Methodist people in my community. We may not be dressed in white robes, but we sing praises to God; and for a short period of time, we ARE set free from the ordeals of the week through which we have just come. When we gather as a community of faith to worship God in Jesus Christ, when we celebrate the sacraments together and sing and pray and give voice to our joys and concerns, there is a sense of real relief. We are uplifted, nourished, and strengthened for the week ahead. And we feel the promise of God that one day we WILL be free from the suffering we might be experiencing today. We hear the reassurance that no matter what the present circumstances, there is a spring from which flows the water of life, and there is a God who loves us and cares for us, a God who will wipe away every tear that falls from our eyes.

Dwelling in the kingdom of God means that we hold the visions and promises given to us through Scripture before us at all times and in all places. From these words and pictures we find hope and strength to carry on and do the work of ministry, relieving suffering when we can, caring for God’s creation and all that dwells within it, fighting the oppressive systems that threaten to destroy us and others, and holding on to the belief that, one day, God’s kingdom will reign on this earth forevermore.