

Anchorholds

Psalm 46; Matthew 7:24-28

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct.19)) 2025

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During the darkest days of the Middle Ages the Black Death/Bubonic Plague was rampant throughout Europe, killing 1/3 of the population. There were also wars, especially wars over kings and power and control while there was also climate change – what we now call the Little Ice Age – causing drought in some places while others experienced torrential rains or freezing temperatures sometimes year around, and short days and very long nights, resulting in agricultural crises and therefore, wide-spread hunger. In the middle of tremendous social upheaval, there were also people who were called “anchorites.” The most famous was Julian of Norwich in England who, around 1395 wrote the first book in English by a woman. These anchorites built small rooms, anchor-holds, attached to the exterior of a church and the anchorites spent their days in prayer and silence and Christian contemplation, and immersing themselves in Scripture, singing and chanting and praying the Psalms every day, and reading and re-reading the Sermon on the Mount. They had small windows on the interior so they could participate in church and receive the Eucharist and had small exterior windows through which they could see the world, know more what to pray for, and have visitors. Anchorites devoted their lives to going deeper into the heart and life of Jesus. As a result, people would seek them out for wisdom, insight, and guidance. These anchorites provided “anchors” for their villages and communities during those fear-filled times.

These days we need anchor-holds – small congregations and people who deepen their lives in Jesus.

Jesus is the center of our faith. He is our anchor.

That may sound obvious but these days it does not seem to be. The earliest confession of faith in history, in the New Testament was Jesus is Lord. For the earliest disciples, ultimate allegiance belonged to Jesus. He inaugurated God's new social order, and the calling and responsibility of disciples was to continue what Jesus had begun. They followed his work, his style, his methods, his actions. They sought to imitate Jesus. They were called to live like Jesus, act like Jesus, forgive like Jesus, serve like Jesus, and love like Jesus.

The call of Jesus meant to make a new start, which meant they first had to repent, or turn from following other lords or loyalties or rulers and turn toward Jesus. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received the Holy Spirit empowering them and guiding them in embodying the Way of Jesus into the world. That same Holy Spirit anchored their faith in Jesus, centering them, rooting them so that no matter what challenges and struggles came, they would remain faithful to Jesus.

I state what should be obvious because these days there are a lot of Christians for whom Jesus is not central. Jesus' death might be central but other than that, Jesus does not matter very much in how they live their lives. The biblical books of Leviticus or Deuteronomy might be central but not the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They understand that the nation/state is the means God uses to bring about salvation rather than the church. Jesus died for us on the cross giving us eternal life, but otherwise, how we live and how we treat our neighbors, and so on is determined more by other authorities – the nation, culture, traditions, and such – instead of Jesus.

So, to restate what should be obvious: Jesus is the center of our faith. And further, the Sermon on the Mount is the center of the teachings of Jesus. This sermon is found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 and has been at the heart of Christian practice by the great saints of the faith for centuries.

I've already alluded to anchorites like Julian of Norwich in the late 14th century, but a hundred years before, in the early 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi walked all over southern Europe and even to Egypt by the roundabout way of modern Turkey, Syria, and the Holy Land in the quest for peace. He memorized the Sermon on the Mount and as he walked, he would meditate and pray through portions of the Sermon. Jesus was central to the faith of Francis and the Sermon on the Mount shaped how Francis saw the world, how he interacted with others, and how he anchored his life in God.

By the early 16th century, the printing press was making the Bible accessible to almost anyone who could read, and at the same time the Bible was being translated into the vernacular of the different languages of Europe. So for example, in Switzerland, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock read the Gospels and rediscovered an active living Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount was the essence of Jesus' teaching and they believed and practiced that love is the chief mark of the church – a love that expressed itself in mutual care for each other, for those around them, and even for their enemies. Because they believed and practiced that the church should be composed of those who make a responsible confession of faith in baptism and commit themselves to following Jesus in daily life, they became known as "Anabaptists." These Anabaptists centered their faith in Jesus, centered their lives in community, and centered their work in reconciliation.

Closer to our own time, in the mid-1930's Dietrich Bonhoeffer centered the life of his alternative seminary in Finckenwald, Germany in Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. The Nazi darkness had overwhelmed the regular church in Germany, and Bonhoeffer knew that to be faithful to Jesus and to resist would take small communities of faith deeply anchored in prayer and the Sermon on the Mount.

To restate my thesis: we need anchor-holds – small congregations and people who deepen their lives in Jesus, who know and practice together the Sermon on the Mount.

As I preach my remaining sermons with you, this morning I call us again to anchor ourselves with the God we know in Jesus. Everyday there are new outrages, and something is going to happen to make us angry, send us into discouragement and despair, overwhelm us, as well as hurt helpless and powerless people. Every day White Christian Nationalism grows louder and more aggressive and the constant stress and worry and anxiety affects our health, and at the same time, our anger not only debilitates us but also turns us into the very people we oppose. We become “damned-good haters” as William Sloane Coffin used to say.

We need to anchor our faith in Jesus deeply enough to withstand such storms and winds and constant buffeting. We all have personal and family struggles from cancer to heart-problems, to troubles with our children, our parents, our marriages, jobs, budgets, paying the bills, and on and on. We're facing the major transition of me retiring and you beginning the process of finding a new pastor, and we all are beginning to grieve. The demands of ministry are increasing, and we have more hungry people and more impoverished people. We are in shock over the growing militarized federal police force in our country and the unbelievable fear and hatred

toward migrants resulting in outrageous arrests and deportation. And who knows what will happen to God's creation.

I'm not suggesting our job is to resolve these things only that we are overwhelmed trying to help and serve. Resistance alone will not sustain us, either as individuals or as a community. We cannot be sustained by anger, by defiance, by frustration, not by cynicism, and certainly not by despair – which is the loss of hope. The only way to survive is to anchor our lives deeply. The only way to help each other and serve those in need is to be centered in Jesus. The only way to be true and faithful to Christ Jesus is abide with Jesus as deeply as we can.

Anchoring our lives reminds us that we are *self-insufficient* – that's self-insufficient. We do not live life alone. Indeed, the term “life alone” is a contradiction in terms. We only have life together. God's Spirit, God's love animates us as we relate and are involved with others and with creation.

In other words, being anchored with Jesus punctures our ideas that we are self-sufficient, self-enclosed, and self-standing. We are relational creatures. God created us to be relational. We are interdependent with each other and God's creation for eating, drinking, breathing, and for livelihoods, care, and service. We are interdependent for life and love.

As writer Bill McKibben likes to say, “being human is a team sport.”

You and I know, when the chips are down, the pressure is on, and the anxiety is high, we tend to isolate. Instead, we are called to recommit to relationships, friendships, and community. For some of us that means lots of people and many friendships. For others of us it means deepening two or three friendships. But the upshot is that life is meant to be lived together.

Even in the Anchorholds, people like Julian of Norwich, had one window facing out into the world, so she knew what and who to pray for, so she could pray and counsel those in need who would come to her window.

With that in mind, allow me to share some further quick reminders.

First, reinvigorate your spiritual practices. Go deep. Now is the time to deepen your daily devotional practices of prayer, devotional reading, journaling, silence, and so on. If you do not have daily spiritual practices, now is the time to get some. If you don't know what to do, come see me or come see Judy, or talk with other veteran Christians here in church. Intentionally set aside some time (doesn't need to be much in the beginning) to talk to the God we know in Jesus and to sit still in silence before God. Read the Sermon on the Mount and re-read it; take your time, read slowly. Read the Psalms and learn to let them be part of your prayer. Sing hymns. There are many ways to intentionally practice being before God, the main thing is to practice it. Just do it. Prayer and devotion decolonizes the mind and the heart. The darkness of fear and anger and hatred will take over your mind and heart. Prayer is the antidote. Prayer opens us to the Light.

Here's a good rule of thumb: Spend twice as much time in prayer and devotion than you spend on social media and the news.

Secondly, practice patience in the face of suffering. Father Richard Rohr defines suffering very simply as “whenever you are not in control.” He says, “Suffering is the most effective way whereby humans learn to trust, allow, and give up control to Another Source.” Likewise, you’ve heard me say many times that the definition of patience is giving up control. We are a church full of people who like control – we like organization, get up and get it done, make plans, and make a difference. Well, we’re not in control. And our lack of control shows up in

anxiety and worry, anger, illness, heart problems, and depression. It shows up with our bearing down and working harder and longer. Suffering without the patience to go deeper results in cynicism and bitterness and it also results in our passing our bitterness to others and to the next generation. Part of our daily devotional practices of prayer and silence is giving up control to God and learning to trust God and trust others.

We've talked before about Antoinette Tuff, the bookkeeper at an elementary school in Decatur, Georgia. In 2013, a young white man, armed with an AK-47 and five hundred rounds of ammunition, walked into the elementary school ready to start killing. Ms. Tuff talked the young man into laying down his weapons and surrendering before anyone got hurt.

When she was asked to explain how she did it, she talked about a contemplative practice that she had been taught by her pastor. The previous Sunday, her pastor had begun a sermon series on how to anchor yourself in God as you move through your life. And it inspired her so much that she got up early on Monday morning so she could study and practice before she went to work. By the time the gunman walked into her school on Tuesday morning, she had been practicing anchoring herself in God, praying on the inside no matter what was going on around her, for two or three days. When that young man walked into her office and pointed a gun at her, she could pray for him and talk to him at the same time. And that's what she did, anchoring herself in God in the midst of chaos, keeping the gunman in view as a struggling human being as clearly as she could see the danger he posed.

Austin Heights, anchor your lives in the living Jesus Christ.

Back to Julian. In May of 1373, she experienced her “showings,” as she called them, when she was very sick and near death. As a priest held a crucifix in front of her, Julian saw Jesus suffering and heard him speaking to her for several hours.

This was such a profound experience that Julian eventually asked the bishop to enclose her in an anchor-hold, built against the side of St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, England. Julian was later named after that church. We do not know her real name, since she never signed her writing. For the next 30 years she prayed and meditated, anchoring her life in Jesus. And wrote the first book in the English language by a woman.

I think it is interesting that Julian spoke of God as both Mother and Father, which was quite daring in the 14th century. She called Jesus our “true Mother” from whom we receive our beginning, our true being, protection, and love.

So, this morning may my final words to you be from Julian of Norwich:

“He said not ‘Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased’; but he said, ‘Thou shalt not be overcome.’” . . . “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God Mother of us all. Amen.