

“DEFINING MOMENTS”
Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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We all experience events in our lives that can be considered “defining moments” – times when a certain thing happens to us that changes our life trajectory. It might be getting married or divorced, starting a new job or leaving an old one, having a baby, or losing a loved one.

Defining moments occur not just for individuals, but for entire generations. Things happen on a larger scale that alter the course of history at the same time they transform our personal lives. For my grandparents’ generation, the defining moments were World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic. My parents’ generation was hugely impacted by the Great Depression and World War II. My own generation of baby boomers had its defining moments – the assassination of President Kennedy, the civil rights movement, and the Viet Nam War. Moving into the 21st Century, millennials were first shaped as teens by 9/11 and later as young adults by the financial crisis of 2008. Today, children and youth in the year 2020 are experiencing their own defining moments – a global pandemic and a new period of reckoning about racial injustice.

It’s you – the young people in our church – who I especially want to speak to this morning, and it’s largely a message of empathy. Whether you are a rising 2nd grader or a graduating senior, the landscape of your life that looked so familiar last September now looks as foreign as a moonscape here in June. Time magazine interviewed a recent college graduate in Florida who put it this way: “We stepped into the world as it was starting to fall apart. It’s caused my generation to have a vastly different perspective than the people just a few years ahead of us or behind us.”

Think about what this graduate has experienced over the last 3 months – a major threat to her health when she is still young and has her whole adult life before her; the closing of her college campus; separation from her peer friends; the challenge of virtual learning; the cancellation or downsizing of many graduation activities; and now, more recently, a convulsion in our wider society in response to systemic racism and police brutality, and, sadly, more polarization than ever in politics and public opinion.

All young people, whether they be grade-schoolers or graduates, have these faced these challenges in some form or fashion over the last 3 months. Here in our church, Sunday School and youth activities came to a screeching halt back in March, and you’ve endured many other stoppages in the meantime in every conceivable way.

But this leads me to make a further observation about defining moments. When you have an experience that fundamentally changes your life, it also forces you to make a pivotal decision. A defining moment is like a fork in the road. Depending on the nature of the event and how you react to it, your life could go one direction or another. A defining moment like the one you are experiencing now presents you with a challenge. It imposes limitations and hardships; it brings you loss and grief. But a defining moment is also an opportunity to do life differently, to establish a new normal for the future, to make the world a better place, not just make a better place for yourself in the world.

The TV journalist Tom Brokaw wrote a book about the young people who grew up in the 1930's and '40's and endured the cataclysms of the Great Depression and the 2nd World War. He called that group "the greatest generation" because they responded to their circumstances so heroically. Faced with a crucial choice, they didn't let the moment define them; they defined the moment by preserving and expanding freedom around the world.

I see plenty of evidence that your generation is rising to this same level of greatness. Yes, you missed classroom learning, proms, senior trips, and indoor ceremonies; but you adapted to these setbacks and showed a remarkable ability to bounce back and flourish. In some cases, you who were graduating demanded and were eventually granted creative ways of celebrating your special milestone, like community parades and drive-by commencements. You made the best of a bad situation; you created some new and unique memories to replace the standard ones.

As an avid newspaper reader, I've followed with great interest the speeches that have been made at makeshift graduation ceremonies in our area over the past few days. The school superintendent in Watertown observed that the class of 2020 "was built to endure the challenges that are behind us and fully equipped to navigate the uncharted waters that lie ahead." The class president at Thomaston high school remarked, "This year has not been the one we have imagined, but it is not something that will get in our way because the class of 2020 has something special. We are resilient and we will persevere. No matter the issue or problem we are presented with, we can get through it." And then, the salutatorian at Crosby High School in Waterbury had this to say to her fellow grads: "We are experiencing things no other class has, and this will push us to do amazing things. This experience has taught us that we need to be the ones to help our world and change it for the better."

She was surely referring not just to the defining moment of the Coronavirus pandemic, but also to the defining moment in our country's long struggle to confront and overcome racism. Over the last several weeks, there have been large and loud rallies around the nation and the world to protest the killing of George Floyd and demand changes in the way our society treats people of color. It's noteworthy that many of these rallies have been organized and led by young people. In fact, young members of our church have been visible and vocal in the peaceful protests that have taken place in our own community. Whether you are black or white, your generation doesn't want to inherit a world where prejudice and discrimination destroy human lives. I commend you for expecting and demanding and working for a more just and peaceful world.

At the same time, I want to warn you that social passion has a short life-expectancy. It tends to claim us in our youth in a big way, then gently fade away. Leopold Tyrmand, writing in the *The New Yorker* magazine, said: "Though nothing keeps us from pursuing what we consider right and fighting against what we see as wrong, the task does become boring after age thirty-five." What's more, many of us simply get tired of encountering apathy and open resistance to our efforts. The seeming futility of what we do causes us to pull back.

Christians can overcome this tendency because our motivation is dual, not single. Yes, like the humanist, we are motivated by the cry of the person who says, "Please, won't you be my neighbor?" But, unlike the humanist, we are also motivated by the voice of Jesus saying, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." The best thing about Christian social action is that it is grounded in our relationship with Christ and thus has the prospect of greater durability.

None of this would be news to the evangelist Matthew. He writes his Gospel toward the end of the 1st Century at a defining moment in the life of the early Church. Christians are undergoing various trials and hardships; they are facing opposition and even persecution. The question is, will they let the moment define them, or will they define the moment?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus calls his followers to profess their faith in him and affirm his teaching, and to do so publicly: "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops" (Matthew 10:27). This means not only that they are called to be personally devoted to Jesus; it means that they are called to live and relate to other people as Jesus does. The prevailing orthodoxy of his time sees God's favor resting primarily upon one race and nation. We see this bias reflected all the way back in today's Old Testament lesson from Genesis, where the Hebrew mother Sarah rejects Hagar, an Egyptian woman who bears Abraham's first son. However, the Jesus we meet in the New Testament proclaims a gospel of all-inclusive love. Read between the lines, and Jesus is saying, "Samaritan Lives Matter" . . . "Gentile Lives Matter" . . . "Tax-Collectors Lives Matter" . . . "Sinners Lives Matter."

Well, we all know how that works out. Jesus meets violent opposition, and he warns his followers that they will meet opposition too. After all, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above a master" (v. 24). When you stand up for what is good and stand against what is evil, expect no exemptions from rejection or suffering. As followers of Jesus, you should not be surprised when you are called names and misrepresented. You should even expect to be alienated from some of your own family members when your loyalty to Christ supersedes all other loyalties. Today, if you speak out against racism or sexism or homophobia, you may get pushback from people you dearly love. Jesus experiences this pushback himself, and wants you to be prepared for it, too.

But notice: in the midst of all these dire warnings, Jesus offers a word of encouragement. God will never, in all that you endure, abandon you. God knows and is concerned about the fall of a sparrow, a creature worth only a half-penny. God is so attentive to your life that even the number of hairs on your head is known to God. Can anyone doubt, then, the attention and care of God for those who love and serve faithfully?

The spiritual writer Marjorie Thompson tells about bumping into a wise little quote on a box of tea, of all places! The message read: "People can be divided into three groups: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened."

Today, I want to say to our graduates and other children and youth, "Thank you for making things happen during a defining moment in your life and the life of the world. However, if you want to continue to make things happen and not become one who just watches or wonders, remain grounded in the presence, purpose, and power of God. Continue your spiritual formation as eagerly as you do your intellectual formation. Anchor your passion in the steadfast love of Christ and his high calling, for he has founded a kingdom which cannot fail.