

Black Mountain Presbyterian Church

September 22, 2019 – Installation Service for David Carter Florence

Sermon given by Kathryn Threadgill

“See, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” Who among us doesn’t like new things? It is precisely the reason we are gathered in this place this morning...to celebrate and acknowledge this new beginning for Rev. David Carter Florence and Dr. Anna Carter Florence, for Rev. Mary Katherine, and for you all as a community of faith. It marks the exciting new beginning of new things that God has in store for you all (or y’all). I...for one...love new things: new shoes, new friendships, new seasons, new adventures, new shoes...Yes, I love new things. And God is doing a new thing! And the really cool part is that we are chosen, by God, to witness it all!All we have to do is let go of former things...things of old...so that we can perceive and serve God in the new thing God is doing. Easy enough, right? Thank goodness we all live this way as disciples of Jesus Christ. Congratulations David, you have found the perfect church, filled with perfect Christians! This is amazing! BUT...and humor me here...in case I’m wrong...and because I have a little bit of time up here...let’s just explore this text together this morning. Because the Christian life of following Christ today is never that easy, right?

For starters, there is change. Letting go of former things of old, because we will never be that again...and in some instances, we should have never been that in the first place. Change to “glory days gone by,” which, by the way, were not so glorious for some people. Change. It means we may be transformed by the Spirit’s power into something we have never known or imagined before. Change...because God is doing a “new thing,” which means we may be called to new places outside our walls of institutionalized church, outside our comfortable pews where we always sit...to make disciples among people who don’t fit into our homogenous environments or assimilate to “this is the way we’ve always done it.” You know...Change. Have I scared you all yet? Are you sure you want me to proclaim this morning?

See, as the Coordinator for Vital Congregations for the PC(USA), I tell church leaders across the country that our beloved church is changing, that Christendom models of church are dying, and church will not look as it once did...which, by the way, makes me one of the most popular people ever! But it is death to “glory days gone by.” It is letting go of former things of old...that paralyze us into stale rituals divorced of any real meaning.... It is the death of going through the motions of Christianity. Because, we got the “reformed” part down really well...we just forgot we were always supposed to be “reforming” in the Spirit’s power. So, I’ll ask David again...are you sure you want me to proclaim this morning?

Now, I’m sure you are all wondering...who is this guest preacher talking about death and change...for an Installation Service. But for me, this is like a homecoming of sorts. I spent my first internship here with Pat Tuttle when I was a student at Montreat College. And you can ask Dr. Anna Carter Florence, in case you could not tell, there is little that frightens me. I grew up in a family of 13. My white parents adopted 11 of us from all over the world and had 2 biological children in the mix. I have brothers and sisters from India, Vietnam, and mixed raced siblings from all over the U.S. I was adopted from South Korea. My biological mother was Korean and my biological father was African American. We grew up in South Alabama, because everyone knows that’s where you go to raise a mixed race, ethnically diverse family in North America. I still remember my dad, who served as the pastor of the only African American PC(USA) church in South Alabama, would dress up like Santa Claus every Christmas and we would have to be his elves and deliver presents to families in need. We would load up in our families 15 passenger van, and my white dad dressed like Santa would have us pass out presents in lower income housing neighborhoods. I think it goes without saying we were a confusing sight for people. But, beyond fearlessness, my family taught me how to strive for a kingdom ethic...that all people belong in the household of God...as brothers and sisters in Christ...and until our churches reflected the kingdom of God...we had work to do.

Go! Make disciples, because God is doing a new thing...now it is springing forth, do you not perceive it? So what if this were true? I mean, what if the living God is truly changing everything?

For the prophet Isaiah this message was to a people wandering desperately in the wilderness. The people of God wandered in Babylonian exile remembering how God had done all these mighty acts in the 1st Exodus to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. God formed a dry path in the waters and provided for them in the wilderness. Now, they are wandering, again, and they long for their former things, for their “glory days gone by.” They wonder where is God to deliver them in the same ways as before. But, the prophet Isaiah tells them it won’t look like anything that has come before.

For us...mainline Christians in North American contexts today, it is what scholars call the “next Great Awakening” in religious traditions. How we are church, share church, transform church today will define generations to come. Every mainline Protestant denomination in North America is asking, “What makes for a vital congregation?” See, we live in these wilderness wandering days, where we feel like remnant people, and no one is sure what the future of the church will look like. For now, the wandering wilderness seems to be a dry and terrorizing place for us....After nearly three decades the PC(USA) has realized we are far too homogenous a denomination that is 89% Caucasian, with a median age of 65 in our pews; and 73% of young adults today who say they have no need for religious institutions, namely because of the “hypocrisy” in the church. Right now, sanctuaries are being burned or become crime scenes for mass shootings. Right now, children practice shooter drills at recess, families are separated and caged, teen suicide rates have doubled, white supremacists march on the streets, ecological crises causes floods and famines, we have pipelines from schools to prisons, and Naomi Wadler has to address the nation as just 12 years old, begging for the lives of young black girls to matter. See, right now...these are wilderness times. We are God’s remnant people wandering. And our old ways of doing church are not working anymore. See, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?

So, how do we let go of former things of old and live as true disciples of Jesus Christ? How do we perceive the new thing God is doing to transform the church? And how can we boldly dare to live as witnesses called to go and make disciples today? See, it is so easy for us to simply

look back, like the Israelites, and to cling to former things. Who wouldn't want to return to "glory days gone by?" (whether real or perceived). For us, those days were glorious because our rituals and traditions, our ways of being church together, didn't have to be questioned. I've heard it said countless times: "People just came to church on Sundays." Or "Our parents didn't give us a choice about going to church." But these are wilderness times, remember. And in the wilderness, everything is called into question...even our very call as disciples of Jesus Christ today. Think about it: What does it mean to follow the living Christ in this post-postmodern time? See, we have created a faith that has become comfortable, a distant god that requires little of us but good morals and niceness, and then we wonder why church isn't relevant in peoples' lives...

One of my favorite Spoken Word Poets, Karness Turner, wrote a poem entitled, "Does Anyone Even Know that you are a Christians?" In it he says,

"Jesus Christ didn't get stretched out on the cross for your testimony to be mysterious; Because silent testimonies have never saved souls; And our testimonies lay low, and we wonder why the world is raising hell; because a lot of Christians are too worried about other people's opinions and too busy trying to save themselves. Does anybody know you're a Christian by your actions, or does everybody think you're a Christian because you're acting? The only reason I'm asking is because half of us are putting on a façade, trying to treat our walk with God like we're expecting full time benefits when God's our part-time job. Does Anybody know that you're a Christian?"

See, it is so easy to fall into niceness...so comfortable to simply do good...so simple to hold on to former things. But our complacency will only leave us wandering in the wilderness. Bohnoeffter wrote that there is a cost to discipleship: "When Christ calls us to follow, he bids us come and die." Matthew wrote: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." Paul said he "delights in suffering for the sake of the gospel." This life of discipleship, this call of the church, this new thing God is springing forth, is not for the faint-of-heart or twice a month "Christians." It requires something of us...in fact, it requires our EVERYTHING!

I spent my seminary internship in Kikuyu, Kenya, working with churches and a refugee school for children and youth, when someone first shared this story of an African tribesman who had become a Christian, but when he refused to denounce Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior, he was killed by his own tribe. It is said this prayer was found in the man's possession after he died...whether a factual story or not, I think its words should ring true for disciples of Jesus Christ today. He writes,

“I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit power. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals. I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I cannot be bought, compromised, deterred, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, back up, let up, or shut up until I've preached up, prayed up, paid up, stored up, and stayed up for the cause of Christ. I must go until he returns, give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until He comes. And when Christ comes to get His own, He will have no trouble recognizing me, because I am a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

To live unashamed as true disciples of Jesus Christ, and to follow God forward in the “new thing” God is doing ...is hard work, and it requires EVERYTHING of us. And when God does a new thing it flips the script on everything that came before it. In the first Exodus, the Israelites were delivered through the sea on dry land. But in the 2nd Exodus, in the new things God is doing, water will spring forth, and streams will flow in the wilderness to mark pathways home. See, “I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Already God is changing the game. Already waters are springing forth to guide God's people out of the wilderness and back home. But their home will not be the same, because the “new thing” God is doing never leaves us the same. Isaiah says in Chapter 41, “I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive.” These are all trees

that do not grow in the same climates, or the same altitudes, or the same regions. They aren't meant to exist together naturally, yet in God's new thing, in God's new community they will grow up together! This radical inclusivity in the new Exodus, where strangers will be welcomed into the community of Christ, and there will one day no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, for all will be one in the kingdom of heaven.

Black Mountain Presbyterian Church...what if this day marked the beginning of God's new things springing forth? David Carter Florence, what if new things were springing forth in and for you as well? What if a new community of radical inclusivity was brought forth and you all got to witness and serve within it? What if the new thing God is doing changed this church forever? What former things would you need to let die? What new disciples would you be called into relationship with? What changes would you be a part of, so that you might perceive the new things God is doing and calling you to? What if today's Installation was in fact a transformation to things never before perceived or imagined? Would you live as disciples unashamed and boldly daring to follow Christ into a new community?

As I travel throughout the country visiting churches throughout the denomination...I get to see bold churches willing to step out, stand up, speak out and change for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Churches who dare to perceive the new thing God is doing in the Church, and serve as witnesses to it all.

Black Mountain Presbyterian Church...my friend, David...I pray you bear witness and serve the Lord with bold faithfulness in the new things God is springing forth. I pray for a radical community of transformation that is alive in Christ. I pray...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit this day and all the days to come. Amen.