

“Our Collective Call” by Pastor Leah Rosso
February 8, 2026 (Week 5/5 of the sermon series)
Matthew 17:1-9

Today is the last Sunday we are specifically talking about “Our Collective Call.” We originally put it into four weeks, one for each part - as you can see on the screen: Identity, Integration with community, Intrinsic Motivation, and Influence. But I kept thinking we needed a fifth week and I recently realized why - because the persistence and determination needed for this call, doesn’t end. Let me explain. First, I want to say that while you can do these steps in this order, they don’t stay in that order. We often forget who we are and have to return to Identity, maybe even every day. We also can easily lose sight of who is in our community, or the vulnerable in our community shift or the influencers in our community shift and so we are constantly working on building trust as we integrate with our community. We also need, of course, to check back in consistently with our intrinsic motivation and make sure that our motives come from a place of health and community and accountability. And, whether we have the first three figured out or not, we will be influencing those around us and so we keep circling back. So these four are fluid. And then there is one more aspect about our collective call, and that is the call to stay in it, even when it’s hard, and as we are finding out right now in the life of our state, it can be really hard.

So where do I go for wisdom and strength and inspiration when it gets hard? Honestly, both from my time in Zimbabwe and here in Minnesota, I often look to black women because they have been on the frontlines of change and hardship and determination forever. Cole Arthur Riley is one of the prophets of our day. She first became known for creating an online space called Black Liturgies, and has since published two books: *This Here Flesh* and *Black Liturgies*. During Lent we’ll be using both books on Wednesdays for “Prayer and Lament” at 6pm. You should all come.

But the reason I bring her up this morning is actually because of her witness about how to deal with pain. Riley lives with chronic pain, but she is not very old. And so family members and friends remember her as the girl who loved to dance and move and jump and run. Those things are not options to her today, so when people ask her how she is, she said she feels like to be honest with them is to disappoint them. She knows that people want her to be the person she used to be- both for her sake and for their own. They long for her to be healed, which is beautiful. But because she lives with the limits of her body, she no longer thinks that her condition is temporary. It’s not that she hasn’t struggled with it herself - obviously her own physical health affects her the most. But through her pain she has worked hard to come to a place of acceptance, even to a place where she can love her body with all its limitations, at least one good days. She shared that she actually began a practice of passing the peace to the different parts of her body, just as we would pass the peace on a

Sunday, she has learned to pass the peace to her back; and to her hips; and to her feet; and to her arms. She has learned to make peace with her limitations, which makes it possible for her to follow her own call.

I thought of her this week as I read this story from the Gospel of Matthew. We are often looking to the Gospel to tell us the stories of healing and light and justice and inspiration. But Jesus is also often preparing his disciples for what is ahead of them, and they don't want to hear it. They don't want to know that their time together is limited; that whatever they had expected the Son of Man to do to change and fix their lives, this probably wasn't going to be that. Before the story we heard Cam read, before they go up to the mountain and experience glory, Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and be turned over to the authorities and will be killed. And Peter, his number one disciple, responds, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." He's in total denial. And then after their experience on the mountain, immediately as they are still walking down, Jesus again tells them that he will die. In fact, in the Gospels, this story of Transfiguration which is in 3 of the 4 Gospels is a mid-point, a turning point. In the Gospel of Luke it says that from the moment Jesus comes down the mountain, Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem. He knows what is coming - maybe not the particulars, maybe not the exact timeline, but he knows that those in power will not let him go on forever. And so what does he choose to do? He chooses to heal, to feed, to share the good news of God's love. He chooses to continue his ministry in all the same ways. He keeps on.

For the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, whose audience is mainly Jewish at the time it was written, the writer wants us to remember as we hear this story, the story of Moses. You see in the last days of Moses' life, he went to the top of the mountain, a common place people went to be with God, and he looks ahead to the promised land, and he realizes that he's not going to make it. This man who brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and then through the wilderness sees the Promised Land and knows he won't make it - but God gives him a glimpse of what's possible and what's up ahead for God's people. In our modern era, even to hear the words, "I may not reach the promised land" makes us think of Martin Luther King, Jr. who did not go to a literal mountain, but declared the night before he died that he wasn't sure he was going to get there. And yet, following Jesus, he kept going. Jesus goes up to the mountain top to be with God, and low and behold, God shows up. God shows up in Moses and Elijah who convene with Jesus in some way; God shows up in the cloud of mist that covers Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and the disciples. God shows up in the voice that says, "This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased." But this time it's not just Jesus that hears that voice, the same voice and the same words as was heard in his baptism. This time it's not just Jesus that God is blessing. This time, with Moses and Elijah and the disciples all enclosed in mist, God's voice calls out to all of them, "Listen to him."

And that listening seems to be directly related to what Jesus has been trying to tell them already. Jesus knows he won't see the Kingdom of God fully realized, and he continues his ministry anyway. Jesus knows he won't live to see every person be healed, and he heals anyway. Jesus knows that he won't live long enough even to see Rome conquered and his people liberated, and he proclaims liberation anyway. He tells them: the work, the witness, the love that is shared is worth sharing. God is with you. Keep on.

Last Sunday all different denominations of Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, as well as some Muslim leaders and a Jewish leader gathered at South Junior High where we prayed for our immigrant neighbors who are suffering and prayed for our wider Minnesota community that is living through this difficult time. And my friend and colleague Pastor James Alberts II got up to share a few words and one of the things he said that has stuck with me all week, is "Don't pray for this to go away. Don't pray for this to go away. Pray that we have the strength and the courage to face it and to live through it."

I was startled at first. James and I don't always agree theologically, but I trust him; so I leaned in to listen harder to what he was saying. And as I listened to my friend who has lived with racism in the St. Cloud area for 30 years and in Texas before that, I began to hear the wisdom behind his words. He was telling us that we may not get to see the promised land. He was reminding us that this journey to combat lies and violence and harm against our neighbors of color did not start with the ICE surge weeks ago. What we are seeking to end began long before us as the European colonists took over native lands; kidnapped native children; forced the people who actually belonged here to move out and created a new system whereby they got to choose who belongs and who doesn't. What we are seeing today has its roots in the slave trade when families were torn apart intentionally, couples separated, children sold off. The events that are happening today and the events of the past are not separate. Their roots grow in the same soil of belief that asserts that certain people, families, and traditions, specifically white people who are in power, are all that matter. And we cannot allow that to continue to grow. We cannot keep going along with terrible injustice. We can't keep silent in order to keep the peace when what we mean is peace for white people. We should not pray for this to just go away, as though we have no part in it. Rather, let's do the work and pray that we have the strength and the courage to face it, to live through it, to come together as a community and to work to change it— for all of our sakes.

Jesus didn't get to see all the fruit of his labor. And there were even times when he asked God not to have to face his own suffering and death. And then there were times, like this morning's scripture, when he went away from the world to rest; to gain the courage he needed; to feel connected to those who came before him; to be filled

with God's Spirit which made it possible for him to go back out and be about the work of healing and justice for all.

Jesus also was not under the impression that he was going to finish the work, which may be helpful for us as well. We may get mighty discouraged in this world when we see hatred gain ground and economic disparity widen and people living in fear. But Jesus never asked us to finish the work, he just keeps inviting us to follow. Our collective call is to join Jesus in his work, in his joy, in his rest, in his ministry- this is why Jesus shares the gift of the Holy Spirit - so that we can continue to follow.

Have you seen the TikTok video going around about how Olympic sports are like church denominations? It starts out by saying that Alpine skiing is like a non-denominational mega church - it's fast, loud, and there are lights everywhere. It compares figure skating to huddled liturgical churches - with robes, candles, precision, and everyone knowing exactly when to stand and sit. Hockey is like a Pentecostal church - it is "full contact, high emotion, someone is crying, shouting, or both." But my favorite is United Methodism. It says we are like cross country skiing: "faithful, steady, and has been doing the work forever. Never flashy, always shows up."

Church, I'll take it. This is our heritage - to not shy away from the work. It is our collective call to recognize the reality of our world today that is so deeply entrenched in the racism of our past, and yet to continue the work because the God we worship cares deeply about justice and compassion and the people of this world. We may not be flashy, but I pray we will always show up. We may not get to the promised land, but I pray we have the courage to keep on because it is our call: to love our neighbor as ourself, to give up our lives to save them, to use the power we have to follow in the way of Jesus.

Written on the wall of a school where Mother Theresa taught:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway.

If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable; be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, there may be jealousy; be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
it was never between you and them anyway.