

Sunday, May 6, 2018
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
1 John 5.1-6; John 15.9-17
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Last week, we talked about the symbolism of Jesus as the vine and us as the branches. We focused on the themes of abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit, and how these are demonstrated by and accomplished through our commitment to live more fully into his commandment: “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13.34; Jn 15.12). Both today’s Gospel reading from John and the Epistle reading from the First Letter of John are continuations of their corresponding readings from last week. They further elaborate on the themes of abiding in Jesus, what it means to bear fruit, and the commandment to love one another. So what more can or needs to be said?

Despite what you may be hoping, I am not going to leave it there and sit down. Because there is always more that can be said. Even on a familiar topic. And frankly, if you were to boil Jesus’ message down into one commandment, it would be – or at least, could be – “love one another as I have loved you.” This statement inherently includes the great commandment – to love God and to love others. And on these, we always need to hear more, to help us live more fully into these core commandments.

I am reminded of a story Jim Lemler, my seminary dean, told on himself during a sermon he preached the first year I was at Seabury. Prior to becoming dean of Seabury-Western, Jim had been a parish priest. One Sunday, a woman dropped her young boy – probably about six years old – at church for Sunday School and the worship service. Why she did not stay is anyone’s guess. At any rate, she came back to pick-up her son after Eucharist, and asked him, “So, what did Father Jim preach about today?” The son replied, “oh, the usual. Blah, blah, blah, love. Blah, blah, blah, love.”

While I don’t remember much else about the sermon Dean Lemler was preaching to us seminary students, his point was that the Gospel really comes down to one thing. Love. And that even on such a familiar topic, there is always more to be said.

The readings for the last few Sundays have focused explicitly on love. On what it means for God to love us and for us to love God. In fact, if you think about it, Easter and the entire Easter season is really about love. About how much God loves us. Even to the point of allowing his own Son to be sacrificed so that we will be saved. What greater expression of love could we ask for? As Jesus says himself in today’s Gospel reading, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15.13). There is no greater demonstration of the love that God has for us, that Christ has for us, than the death and Resurrection of God’s only Son. That is the continuing theme of our readings for this Easter season. To look at what this unbounded love means for us. To show just how amazing that love is. And what it means for us to live into our places as beloveds of God.

Our Gospel for today expands on what it means particularly to abide in Christ and to live more fully into his commandment to love one another as a natural response to the love he first showed us. Specifically, Jesus talks about giving us two gifts as a result of his love for us – the love of God that is manifest in him.

First is the gift of joy. Jesus tells us, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15.11). Jesus expresses the profound joy that he has by being in relationship with God. By experiencing the love of God in his own life. By being able to respond to that love by keeping God’s commandments – an outward expression of that love and the means of sharing God’s love with others. Jesus wishes to share that joy with those who follow him. He recognizes that the way for us to experience that joy is to follow his example. To abide in and receive God’s love manifest through Jesus Christ. To follow Jesus’ commandments to love others, thereby sharing the love we receive with others.

Jesus promises that in following his example we will have joy and that our joy will be complete. This completeness of joy comes from living into the fullness of what it means to have been made in the image and likeness of God. This completeness of joy comes from living into the fullness of who God has lovingly created and called us to be. This completeness of joy comes from experiencing God’s unbounded love in our own lives.

Which brings us to the second gift Jesus gives us – a new type of relationship that is commensurate with and even further contributes to the completeness of joy we are given. Jesus tells us, “You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15.14-15). This may not seem like such a big deal to us. This side of the Resurrection we are quite familiar with the concept of Jesus as friend. Of having a closely bound relationship with Jesus that is like, although deeper than, relationship with our closest and dearest friend. But in Jesus’ day, this concept was unheard of. In fact, those hearing these words would have been utterly shocked at the notion. In fact, such a concept would have been considered blasphemous. There was a strict hierarchy when it came to the divine. A god – any god, our own included – was viewed as a master and his followers viewed themselves as servants. Those whose sole purpose is to follow and do the bidding of their god.

In naming us friends, Jesus is putting us on a more equal, more intimate level. Not that we are equal to God. But that relationship with God through Christ is not one of servitude, but rather is one of mutuality. That we are partners in ministry. This would particularly become obvious after his death, Resurrection, and Ascension, when in his physical absence and by virtue of our new relationship with Christ we became his Body in the world. That we are charged with a purpose as his Body. To carry on the ministry of love that he began – “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34b). That through this new relationship with Christ, this friendship, in which we are invited to work and minister side-by-side, we are given a sense of purpose, of fulfillment, of wholeness. We are brought into the creative work of the Divine, becoming co-creators with God through Christ in helping to bring about a better world.

And even more so, that we are endowed by God with what we need to do this work. Both individually and as a community of faith. A community where we collectively use our unique gifts and talents to carry on Christ's ministry in the world. A community where we are sustained by the Spirit, energized by the Spirit, to be Christ's heart of love and hands of healing in a broken world.

This friendship is not something we can make happen. It is something that we are invited into because Christ loves us so much. As he tells us, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn 15.16a). And an unspoken aspect of this state of being chosen is that we are each chosen because we have particular skills, gifts, and talents that are needed in building the Kingdom. That because of who we are and what we have to offer, we are chosen and called into particular forms of ministry where we are able to use our gifts and talents to the fullest. Because of this special calling that each of us has, following him is not the heavy labor of a servant, but the easy labor of love. As we hear in the Epistle reading today, "And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith" (1 Jn 5.3b-4).

Through our faith, through our obedience to follow where he leads, through our obedience to his commandment to love one another we can conquer the world as it is, and through the transforming power of love, build the Kingdom God envisions. To be fellow workers with Christ, specifically chosen by him, to help make the love demonstrated and the salvation achieved through his Resurrection a reality.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)