

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 17, 2020**

**A Liturgical Note:** As we approach the end of Eastertide [the fifty days that follow Easter Sunday], we who follow the lectionary have a decision to make as we choose texts for Sunday. We do have appointed texts from the Gospel of John for the Sixth and Seventh Sundays of Easter. Their focus is on our Lord's promise to send '*the Advocate/Comforter*' who will guide the followers of Jesus as they join him in the resurrection. However, Jesus' ascension happens forty days after Easter, placing it between the Sixth and Seventh Sundays of the season. I have only known of a few churches that celebrate Ascension Day on the appointed Thursday. Most churches generally celebrate '*Ascension Sunday*' on either the Sixth or Seventh Sunday of Eastertide. We will focus on our Lord's ascension into heaven on next Sunday, May 24.

### **Introduction**

We are living in a difficult time. If there has even been a time that we need the promised Comforter it is now. As we move from quarantine to a limited resumption of the lives we knew before Covid-19, I have become concerned about the increasing incivility reported in the news media. People talking about their '*right to not wear facemasks*' if so they so choose, their right to gather in groups with no regard to social distancing, and their right to do as they will, regardless what our elected leaders and healthcare professional recommend stands against both reason and compassion.

Our Gospel for today begins with Jesus' promise to send the Comforter to assist his disciples as they tell the story of his resurrection. Notice that in the first part of the reading, the promised Comforter is a sign of God's love. Jesus asks us to abide in the love of his Father. ***But what this mean?***

In the second portion of the reading, Jesus becomes very specific: ***We are to love others as he loves us.*** In future Sundays, we will explore the implications of these words. ***But what is striking is how it applies to our immediate situation.*** Wearing masks when we go out and practicing strict social distancing is the way we are currently being called to practice our Lord's command to love one another. This becomes all the more problematic as some of our government leaders talk about '*reopening our economy*' whatever the implications for those with compromised health conditions. The question we are struggling with is: ***How do we measure the worth of human lives against our nation's economic wellbeing?***

We know how Jesus would answer. Be it with our brothers and sisters at church, our friends, and our beloved family members, we practice the love of God by protecting those at risk. In no uncertain terms this means doing what we know works to protect those who are vulnerable to the devastation of the Covid-19 virus. I wish you well in the days and weeks ahead. Living our faith means putting the safety of those around before our own needs. May God be with you.

In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve

### **Gospel – John 14.15-21, 15.9-17**

Jesus said to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete . . .

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 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. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

### **“Better than Yearbook Promises”**

**Let us pray.** O God of unfailing mercy, we acknowledge Jesus as our Savior and as the foundation of our lives. His constant love, his insistent call, and his enduring presence free us to be his disciples. But Lord, being a disciple frightens us . . . and we are afraid to follow in his steps. Instead, we hold ourselves apart as if more important tasks are awaiting us. And often, we choose to live for ourselves at the expense of others.

Dearest God, forgive our reluctance to faithful servants. It is our prayer this day that you would send your Spirit upon us to open our hearts, to heal our wounded spirits, and to unite us in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus, who gave himself so that all your children might have life. Amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

As we approach the end of May, our thoughts turn to our young people as they complete their high school and college work in preparation for graduation. **But this year, things are different. Covid-19 has changed everything.** The pomp and circumstance of the graduation ceremony, the open houses, and the gathering of family and friends will either be delayed or had under far different circumstances than in previous years. My heart breaks for those who will experience the ‘covid-19’ graduation of 2020. Please know that you are in my prayers and the prayers of your church.

Vicki's and my daughters are in their early thirties, so the Olson family has not had a graduation for a number of years. When they graduated from high school, one of the rituals was 'senior day' when all those graduating were excused from classes and allowed to have their friends from all grades sign their yearbooks. When I graduated in the mid-60's, we did the same thing. Several year ago, Joanna and Julia asked to see my high school yearbook from the year I graduated. I must confess that I had not looked at 'The Vista' for many years. My daughters had questions . . . **'Dad, what did you look like in high school? Who were your friends? What was graduation like at Mounds View High School?'**

To make a long story short, we looked at pictures . . . I answered questions . . . And they laughed at our hair styles, skinny ties, my black-rimmed glasses, and the senior pictures of me and my friends. What caught my eye were the notes that we, as graduating seniors, wrote in each other's year books. Here are some samples:

**From Jim . . . I don't remember him at all because there were 485 graduates in my class. 'Steve, It's been a lot fun to know you these past years. I hope to see you in the future. . Best of luck. Jim R.'**

**Timothy N wrote . . . 'Steve, it's been a long drag. Remember to be strong. I expect to hear from in '68. Tim.'** I haven't a clue what was going to happen in 1968, and I certainly didn't see Tim then. In fact, I haven't seen him since the day of graduation. He's never been to a class reunion.

**My friend Peter wrote: 'Steve, don't forget that chemistry experiment . . . We were off by ± one million percent. See you this summer. Pete.'** We have lost contact with each other.

**From a fellow Latin student: 'Labor vincit omnium . . . or something like that' It's been great knowing you and I hope we can continue our friendship in the years ahead. Al.'** Al dropped out of sight, and, from what I know, has never surfaced.

**Joel in physics wrote: 'Steve, remember that G stands for the gravitational constant and that it equals  $6.67 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^3/\text{kg}\cdot\text{sec}^2$  . . . If you do, everything will always work out . . . Let's get together this summer.** Strangely, to this day, I remember the gravitational constant . . . though it's not much use in normal conversation.

**Joan wrote: 'English has been different . . . Study hall has been boring . . . And Social studies has been awful. I'm glad you went through it with me. All in all it wasn't a bad year. See you this summer. Joan.'** I never followed up on that one.

You get the idea . . . It was enjoyable to read forgotten notes from friends long ago. But I noticed a similarity about them. As new graduates, we were sitting on top of the world . . . We had exciting plans . . . And we looked forward to spending a lot of time together in the months ahead. What I remember is that we were all so close to each other then; So close that we couldn't imagine not seeing each other. My friends and I made all sorts of promises: ***'I'll see you this summer . . . Let's get together and talk . . . I expect to hear from you in 1968.'***

But promises aside, I never saw Timothy, Al, Joan, Jim again. They were just a few of the people who moved out of my life after graduation. ***We had the best of intentions — But even though we were friends, we were at a unique point in our lives.*** It was the time when we would be drawn down many different paths. Some to military service and Vietnam; some to college or tech schools; there were others who went to work; and still others who seemed to disappear. That's just the way life is. But we didn't know any of this when we signed yearbooks on the last day of school. We didn't know what the future would hold for any of us. We didn't know about the forces that would soon pull us apart. So we made what I call ***'year book promises'*** – Promises that we intended to keep; but promises that were never fulfilled because of where life took us in years that followed.

***Part of growing up, I think, is to realize that many promises are made, and that almost as many are broken.*** Like I said, we have the best of intentions; but in time, we forget, we change our minds, and more often than not, circumstances force a change in plans. But there is also more sinister side to human nature. Sometimes we are not faithful to our word. Sometimes we make promises knowing that we will never keep them. And sometimes promises are made and then broken as we are betrayed by those we trust. Because there is an intrinsic brokenness in our lives, friendships, family life, marriage relationships, and even our relationship with God are often marked with our broken promises. Sin is another word for this brokenness.

Given all of this, what then of God's promises? Can we trust them? What do they mean for us? Several things, I think. ***First, God is faithful. God remembers promises.*** They are not 'yearbook promises.' In today's Gospel, Jesus promises those who follow him, ***'I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED; I AM COMING TO YOU. IN A LITTLE WHILE THE WORLD WILL NO LONGER SEE ME, BUT YOU WILL SEE ME; BECAUSE I LIVE, YOU ALSO WILL LIVE.'*** The disciples were blissfully unaware of what the future held for them. They had gathered in the upper room with Jesus to eat the Passover. But Jesus knew – *crucifixion for him, despair for them.* Like children who have become separated from their mothers, they would soon know the terror of being alone in a hostile world.

Lest we think ill of the first disciples, I suggest that we look to our own lives. I think that all believers, at one time or another, have experienced the same sense of abandonment. I hear this today as people are reflecting how Covid-19 has affect their lives. Like I wrote last week, we want our old lives back. As if discipleship wasn't already hard enough. How can be faith and trust God when we live in such an uncertain time?

***Make no mistake: Discipleship is dangerous and difficult business.*** Our world has been turned upside down for us. And in a way there is a sense the God has stepped back and abandoned us in the midst of this present crisis we face. The power of the Good News is dimmed as circumstances beyond our control [Covid-19] as well as the tragic consequences of our sin break over us like wave after wave on a troubled sea. ***Where are the blessings now? . . . Broken promises . . . Where is Jesus when we need him?*** It's almost enough to convince us that Jesus has gone and that we are alone.

But unlike the disciples in today's Gospel, ***we live after the resurrection.*** We have historical perspective: we even know the end of the story. Jesus' resurrection changed everything. He was no longer present to his disciples in the old familiar way. Recall for a moment, the resurrection stories on the first Easter. The Gospels tell us that within a short time, even the resurrection appearances stopped. Jesus was no longer seen by his disciples, past or present. But he left them with a promise: ***'I WILL ASK THE FATHER AND HE WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER ADVOCATE TO BE WITH YOU FOREVER . . . I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED . . . I HAVE SAID THESE THINGS TO YOU WHILE I AM STILL WITH YOU. BUT THE ADVOCATE, THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHOM THE FATHER WILL SEND, WILL TEACH YOU EVERYTHING AND REMIND OF ALL THAT I HAVE SAID TO YOU.'***

But the Good News today is that Jesus has made good on his promise. We are not alone. For that matter, neither we, nor the Twelve, nor anyone who calls Jesus ***'Lord'*** have ever been alone. In the upper room, Jesus promised to send another ***'Paraclete.'*** ***'Paraclete.'*** comes from a Greek word meaning ***'one called to the side of another for aid and comfort; one who convinces, counsels, and strengthens.'*** In the Gospel of John, the Paraclete is preeminently the presence of Jesus to believers. Jesus is with us today . . . in this sanctuary ***and*** wherever we go as we pass through the doors to the outside.

***And second, the promise of Jesus' presence comes when we gather together in his name. In baptism, we are chosen to be part of a new community . . . a community that reaches out to the world in love because our Lord has first loved us.*** In their last hours together, Jesus spoke of discipleship. The disciples were to live in relationship with him . . . Jesus said that they were to ***'abide in his love.'*** To help them understand what he meant, Jesus said that he was the Vine and that they were the branches. They drew nourishment from him and were tended by God who was the Vinedresser. Under the care of the Vinedresser, the branches either bore fruit or were destroyed. But if they remained linked to Jesus, disciples would always bear fruit.

Had Jesus stopped here, I think, we disciples would have been happy. If faith in Jesus were nothing more than abiding in his love, life would be easy for the believer. Religion then, would be a purely vertical affair between God and myself. But Jesus has chosen otherwise. He has made things immensely more difficult. Jesus is very specific about what it means for disciples to bear fruit. His words ring in our ears. **'IF YOU KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS, YOU WILL ABIDE IN MY LOVE . . . THIS IS MY COMMANDMENT, THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU . . . GREATER LOVE HAS NO MAN THAN THIS, THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS . . . NO LONGER DO I CALL YOU SERVANTS, BUT NOW I CALL YOU FRIENDS.'**

When Jesus speaks of love, he means something far different than do we. For us, love is an emotion . . . a feeling for another person that is conditioned by their response. But not so with God's divine love. **As it is worked out in Jesus, love is to be 'for' another person and to act on their behalf; even at cost to oneself.** For those who follow Jesus, 'giving one's life for another' may be done a day at a time, an hour at a time, or even a 'minute at a time. Giving one's life for another may be as simple as loving one's children or recognizing the God-given dignity of another human being; or it may be as difficult as joining a brother or a sister in the searing loneliness of their pain. Today it includes wearing masks and social distancing. There is no other way. Loving Jesus, we are no longer called 'servants,' 'but 'friends.' As friends of Jesus, we are called to love one another as he loves us . . . And nothing can ever be more difficult, or more rewarding, than that. In this time of crisis, we are called to find new ways of caring each other . . . Phone calls, Facetime chats, written notes of encouragement, etc. We are called to be creative in the way we care for each other.

God will bless our efforts. God does not make 'yearbook promises.' His promises are real. The Comforter is will come and is with us now as we live in the resurrection of Jesus. After all, we are friends of Jesus. And to his friends, Jesus says, **'BY THIS SIGN ALL PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES, IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.'** Amen.