

“You Ready?”
Easter 5 - May 15, 2022 – John 13:31-35/C

When (Judas) had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” **John 13:31-35**

Today is the Fifth Sunday in the season of Easter, and for the past five weeks we have heard *miraculous* stories about resurrection and encounters with the Risen Christ. We have seen *miraculous* actions of the Spirit’s work in the world. But now, halfway into our 50 days of Easter celebration, we return to a night BEFORE Easter happened, and we wonder how this story might be categorized as *miraculous*. But when Jesus begins to speak about living out of love - as he has modelled for them - even we moderns might be able to imagine how even a pinch of that kind of change in humanity might be considered “*miraculous*.”

They were sitting at supper table, as Jesus attempts to prepare them for what is coming. He is giving them his best, loving advice to help them begin to see **how** to live into what God was doing in their lives and in their community, as they moved through what must have seemed the darkest days of their ministry as Jesus’ students. Thus, the context for Jesus’ words was the foot-washing – that intimate and loving action in which the Lord and Savior of the Universe had knelt down before each one of them, unlaced their sandals, poured cool water into a basin and washed their feet - even the feet of Judas, before their journey began.

This is NOT the gospel that sets Jesus’ goodbye in the context of the institution of Holy Communion, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story. No, the Gospel of John places the giving of the New Commandment by Jesus **in place of** the bread and the wine, in such a way that we should not miss that the body and blood of Christ will be in their actions – not simply their rituals. And the miracle that was being planted in all their lives - and yours and mine – was so that we might all begin to understand our mission as having **sacramental** significance not just for us, but for the whole world. (A reminder here that a sacrament is first and foremost a means of grace: it is not something we do for God - but something God does for us...baptism and communion.) So when Jesus says, “*Love one another, as I have loved you,*” he pushes the focus of our relationship beyond **us receiving Christ for ourselves**, to the act of bearing the fruit of **the world receiving Christ through us**. It’s **how** everyone will know we are friends of Jesus, his students - his disciples - because we **are** Easter, (and Advent!) We **are** Christ’s love in the world when we finally take seriously our calling to bring the love and hope and comfort of God - not just for us - but to the world that God so loves.

Back in the early 1970’s there was a series of historical fiction books called The Kent Family Chronicles, which followed the Kent family from England to America during the Revolutionary War. Generations of the family come into contact with real historical characters like Benjamin Franklin and Paul Revere, a fascinating re-telling of American history inside the Kent family. The one thing I still remember from books is the family’s motto: “*Take a stand and make a mark...*” What a great motto for followers of Jesus! Especially those who claim Lutheran roots - for Martin Luther is famous for saying “*Here I stand!*” and for making quite a mark. Thus we must stand and be a visible mark of the love that Jesus brought into the world. We are the witnesses, who by our very presence **in** the culture, can **change** the culture. And just as parents are honored when their kids turn out okay, Jesus is honored when his followers “love one another” and take it to the streets.

It's a hard ask, this kind of love. And we know full well that “self-sacrifice” is not a great selling-point for the Christian brand. We don't like to give up what is ours when we have earned it, or deserve it, or must share with those who did neither. Following Jesus is hard. It's confusing. It's scary. And just like those first disciples, we don't know what to DO. One thing I have learned, though, is that if I am in a situation where I don't know what to DO, I am probably depending solely on my own strength and resources. Following Jesus begins with *Jesus* – not with us. It begins with the Spirit of the living Christ choosing us, calling us and inviting us into the compassion that allows us to love one another. Come and see.

In the New Interpreters Bible, commentator O'Day sums it all up: *Jesus' death as the ultimate act of love is not the **giving up** of one's life, but the **giving away** of one's life. The distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is **grace**, not **sacrifice**. Jesus gave his life... as an expression of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. His death was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity.*

So, take care that you do not make Easter the End Point of Faith. This year, in the Easter morning Opinion section of *The New York Times*, Tish Harrison Warren wrote that Christians believe that because Jesus is risen, the same power that raised him from the dead is alive in us as well. She quotes Paul's letter to the Romans, “*The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you...*” Her point? “Easter is a verb. It is not a one-time event but something ongoing, that happens **to us** and **in us**, as we ask Jesus to transform our lives... and that the piercing light of the Resurrection fall on the darkness in our cramped selves.”

(Quote) “If Jesus defeated death one morning in Jerusalem, then suddenly... every new birth, every repaired relationship, every ascent from despair, every joy after grief, every recovery from addiction, every coral reef regeneration, every achievement of justice, every rediscovery of beauty, every miracle, every found hope becomes a sign of what Jesus did...and of a promised future where all things will be made new.”

You are Easter's promise for the world. And your credential is Love. Jesus didn't deny who he was; he lived his identity fully. So, we seek to love in a way that brings people closer to God and to one another, to live a love that illustrates a new reality for the possibilities of community. At a time when “traditional” churches' participation numbers are crashing, this is the gift we bring to a hurting world. We can't fake it, we can't manufacture it, but we **can** live it. Perhaps we should be more conscious of how we take our “church words” into the world. Perhaps when we hear the word “gospel,” we should speak it out in the world as “God's love.” When we hear the word “Easter,” we should speak it as “New Life.”

Because Easter is *still* the basis for sharing ourselves with others, and the Story of God and Us still has POWER. God's love still heals the hurt of divisions. God's love continues to bring new life out of old wrecks. God's love, through us, still fills the empty “holes in souls.” But, can we actually live out this mission to the whole world? Is the church really ready to make this huge step outside of our pandemic cocoon and let the Resurrection butterfly spread her wings? Yes, we can. I believe that it is simply who we are. It is who God has invited us to be.

What if someone said to you, *Tell me about your church, Advent.* Where do you start? With the worship or the programs or the building or the doctrine? So many ways to answer that request, but it is usually best if we tell about the people, because in this group we share the changes of our life – kids growing up before our eyes, people growing in faith and connecting to God in ways that send them out into the world to serve. Some who participate in everything and some who simply watch. But Advent is people who are listening to God and learning how to form a

community that looks way different than it used to, while still holding Christ at the very center of our hearts.

And that begs the harder questions – the questions our Council has been intentionally considering since even before March 2020. Questions about the future. *“Who will we be in 20-25 years? You know, institutional church is in decline in America, so where will we be then?”* Well, we don’t know. But some of us remember that 20-25 years ago (that would have been the turn of the millennium!) this sanctuary was only a dream. There was no Meditation Garden or Labyrinth or firepit to the east. We hadn’t sent six of our members to seminary to become pastors nor had we received almost a dozen interns to train. We had no Youth and Family staff, and our Mission trips to Mexico, Agua Prieta, the Gulf Coast and Haiti had just begun. Likewise, our Preschool, and the opening of our doors to host a Laotian worshipping community or the Church of South India or over 100 children in the Dominican Republic. No God’s Kids or Justice League or Bell Choir or Children’s Choir. Lots hadn’t happened – and yet God was still very much in the people in this place, and that same Holy Spirit is guiding and inviting us into our own unknown future.

So, I invite you – encourage you – implore you – to use the power of **who you are** to tell folks **who God is and what God has done for you**. Tell the world there is a way to find New Life when they are in desperate need of second chances, then give them one. Tell them there is a way to find love, in a world full of pain and separation, then befriend them. Tell them there is a way to find a place to belong, “where everybody knows your name” then bring them into your circle. And the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the Spirit of the Living Word, Jesus, Son of God, Savior of the World, will give you strength to “take a stand and make a mark.” And they will know we are Christians by our love...for real. **Amen.**

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Resources: Tish Harrison Warren - Opinion: Why it Matters That Jesus Really Rose from the Dead - *New York Times* - April 17, 2022; New Interpreters Bible p. 734; *The Fox in the Henhouse* - The Rev. Joe Evans, First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, TN. - **Day1**; Commentary on the Acts lesson by The Rev. Kristin Adkins Whitesides/**Day1**.