

6th Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021
John 15:9-17

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Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As I've mentioned a few times over the past month at On The Way, in sermons, and probably in the adult Sunday School class as well, the lectionary in the Easter season focuses our attention on the nature of our relationship with Jesus after his resurrection as a way of preparing us for our mission as the church. That just happens to fit perfectly with the work of strategic planning that we have taken on this year as a congregation, led by our council and the strategic planning team. You will have noticed, I hope, the recent e-mails about the congregational survey that we have sent out. The intention here is to take the pulse of the congregation, to understand from you not only your areas of participation at Grace, but also what specifically you value and maybe don't value among all our various areas of activity. Today is the last day to get in your responses before we begin to have a look at the results tomorrow. Let me reiterate that we'd like everyone in your household who participates in any way at Grace to take a separate survey. Let me say also that this is not just for Grace members, but for anyone who participates. And in this strange time of Covid, that includes a group of you who are regularly attending our services from far away places like Pennsylvania, Mississippi, and Georgia, as well as closer places like the Quad Cities, Chicago, and St. Louis. If you feel so moved, we'd even be interested in your input, because you have found something of value in our live-streamed worship services that has been meaningful to you in your life of faith. We will use this information to help us discern as a congregation the specific expressions of ministry that we are being called to in this time and place.

One of the important things we learn about the nature of our relationship with Jesus revealed in the Easter season texts is that it is bound to challenge our cultural and religious assumptions. Human beings seem to be hardwired with a religious instinct that suggest to us that God is to be feared and obeyed, that if we fear and obey God, things will go well for us, and if we do not, they will not. It's the logic that runs through much of the book of Job that God slaps down at the end. Today's texts take this instinct of ours to task, together with the cultural assumptions we've added to it. The last time I preached on this set of readings three years ago, I focused on the first reading, which is the end of a chapter-long story about a vision Peter had about breaking Jewish food laws, followed by an encounter with a Roman Centurion that completely changed his mind about who God cares about and how God operates. Peter's religious and cultural assumptions had led him to believe that God only cared about the Israelites, the chosen people, and that if God worked in and through anyone, it would be one of their own people. But by encountering flesh-and-blood Gentiles in whom God was clearly working, he realized that God was changing the rules. His eyes and his mind are opened.

In today's Gospel reading, which is a continuation of last week's, Jesus is similarly at work to open the eyes and minds of the disciples. There are three things that I want us to notice here that challenge our own religious and cultural assumptions and draw us into a more authentic relationship with Jesus.

First, Jesus does the choosing, not us. One of the strong cultural assumptions that we have in our context is that we are in charge of our own destiny. We value the individual above the collective, and buy into the cultural narrative that individual choice and hard work alone will make us successful and self-sufficient. Because of that, as I suggested last week, we tend to treat our relationship with God as one of the good choices we make, or don't. We choose to go to church

and behave ethically, to be a “good person,” on the calculation that God will be happy with us and reward us. It’s one of those choices like buying insurance or saving for retirement. Jesus tells the disciples, to the contrary, “you did not choose me, but I chose you.” In other words, you’re not in charge of this relationship. And to that, our instinctual, common-sense selves respond, “of course, Jesus, you’re the boss. You’re God and we’re not,” still counting on our wise choices.

But that leads to the second thing I want us to notice here. Jesus does not really want to be our boss. Maybe that has been necessary at some point in the relationship, but it is not where he wants to leave things. It’s our innate religious instinct that tells us that God is the master and we are the servants, that God tells us what to do and we do it, and that’s just how it is. Jesus changes the equation here. He does not want us to be servants, but friends. He doesn’t simply want us to follow orders. He could have made robots to do that. That’s how computers work. They do exactly what you tell them to do, and nothing else. But that is not the relationship that we were created for. Jesus wants us to be his friends, not his robots, friends who share the same purpose and vision, and the same joy in the life we are invited to share.

And that leads to the third thing to notice in this reading: the purpose and vision that Jesus wants us to share with him, the fruit that he seeks from us. (Remember, Jesus is still working with the vine and branches imagery that we had in last week’s reading.) That purpose, of course, is love. Love was God’s motivation for coming among us as one of us in Jesus, as we learned back in chapter three. And love is God’s ultimate intention for us, the goal of our lives. But this, too, goes against our grain and against our culture. We are enculturated look out for ourselves, to be self-sufficient and self-centered. But love is not, and cannot be, self-centered. That’s perhaps the single most important thing we overlook, both in our relationship with God and in our relationship with one another. Love is other-centered. It is not a feeling, but an orientation. Love leads us to lay down our lives for our beloved, and to derive both joy and meaning from being so fully invested in the lives of others.

One last thing – and maybe this is a fourth thing to notice in the text. I have long been a little bothered by love being a commandment in this part of John’s Gospel. It doesn’t ring true for me because I don’t think you can command love. And also, it doesn’t flow very well from Jesus changing our status from servants to friends. Friends don’t command friends. I found some help in this from my trusty Greek lexicon, which defines this usage of the Greek word – which can mean command in other contexts – as the precepts of Jesus. So what’s a precept? I had to look it up too to be sure. It’s a general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought, like, for instance, the principle of innocent until proven guilty in our legal system. I don’t know if that helps you, but it helps me. What Jesus is really saying here, if this is true, is that love for us is a guiding and organizing principle. It is a core value, something to always bear in mind and hold before ourselves. If we are Jesus’ friends, we will share this core value with him.

That’s the goal. But of course we are works in progress, just like the disciples were. God is still working on us to wean us away from our self-serving, self-centered allegiances and ways, to revise our servant-master mentality, and to recenter our lives in love. No one in the New Testament is a better example than this of Peter. John’s Gospel ends with Jesus forgiving Peter for his denial and reorienting him to love and serve. And in our first reading we see the results of Jesus’ persistent love for Peter as he is opened up to the lives of people he never imagined caring for. That’s the goal for us too, and God in Jesus is at work to likewise reorient our lives as well by the power of the Holy Spirit. May we trust in that promise of God’s persistent love for us in Jesus, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the risen Christ Jesus. Amen.