

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 9, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 15:9-17

[Jesus said:] ⁹“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

The Jewish believers who now followed Christ were absolutely amazed. Never before had the Holy Spirit fallen upon a gentile (a person who didn’t believe in God) and his household. Peter himself would’ve also been just as astounded if it weren’t for the dream he had that told him to go to Cornelius’ house and proclaim the word of God.

It was during Peter’s preaching about Jesus when the Holy Spirit fell upon the household of Cornelius. It was then that the surprise of God’s love and grace became an open door to all people. It was in this moment that the mission of the church expanded to the ends of the earth. The commissioning of Jesus’ call to baptize all people now really meant *all people*.

In all the years that you have been a part of a faith community, whether it was here at Hill Avenue Grace or another faith community, was there ever a time when you became surprised



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by someone who began to become active in the faith community? What was it about them that surprised you? Were they someone who you thought didn't believe in God? Was it someone who you thought didn't belong? Or was it for some other reason?

It is unfortunate that the Lutheran church of today has a bad habit of evangelizing in its own comfort zones. In other words, we Lutherans are really good at praying for and caring for our members and anyone who comes into our doors (or logs on to our Zoom link) on Sunday morning for worship. It's been years since the church was equipped to go out into the world to love and serve neighbor, stranger, and even foe.

Back in the first few centuries of the Christian church, going out to proclaim God's good news and inviting the hearers to come and see was the only way the mission of God could be carried out. Back then being a disciple of Jesus meant to go out into the broken world and love and serve all people, creating opportunities for the Holy Spirit to fall upon their hearts. In doing so, the door became open for them to explore what it meant to be in loving relationship with Jesus.

The exploration begins with establishing a relationship between disciple and the person whose heart has just been stirred by the Holy Spirit. Through the growth of that relationship, a sense of belonging begins to form. As the sense of belonging gets stronger, the person becomes more and more curious about the life of a follower of Jesus. It is at this point that the person becomes interested in coming to worship and participating in the faith life of the community. Once more participation and worship and the faith life of the community happens, this is when the person stirred up by the Holy Spirit begins to believe in Jesus and God's enormous love. Usually, at this point, the person is ready to be baptized, or reaffirm their baptism should they have already been baptized, and enter into loving relationship with Jesus, where they will most likely discover that they had already been in loving relationship with Jesus.

This is how the ancient church grew to eventually become a worldwide religion. Of course, up until the 4th century, when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the national religion of the entire Roman Empire, loving and serving others and proclaiming the good news was dangerous. It cost many their lives through martyrdom. Yet members of the ancient church were willing to lay down their lives for their fellow friends in Christ.



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What is interesting is that the state of the world today is looking more and more like the first few centuries of the Christian church. There are more and more people in the world who have not grown up in the Christian church, or who have fallen away from the Christian church. For a lot of these people the only time they hear of the Christian church is when it appears on the news for some reason. Usually, the news report is about some scandal or conflict. One could say that there are more gentiles than believers out there today.

But this also means that there is a new opportunity for the church to go out into the world to love and serve in the name of Jesus; to establish new relationships with neighbors, strangers, and even foes, so that they can experience Pentecost joy as the Holy Spirit falls upon their hearts. The mission of the church is not dying. For God still chooses to make us the hands and the feet that go out and live into the commandment of Jesus to love others as Jesus has loved us. God is not done with the church!

Two weeks from now, we will be celebrating the feast of Pentecost. During our Pentecost worship we will be affirming our baptisms as a faith community. In doing so we are reaffirming our commitment to live as Christian disciples within our faith community but also out into the world. Pentecost is a reminder to us that we are still called by God to use our gifts and talents in order to love, serve, build relationship, and invite others into the body of Christ.

And we are free to continue in this work because the Holy Spirit is now a part of us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus forever abides in us and us in him. This means that the love of God continues to be a part of us, which is what brings us forgiveness, protects us from the lure of sin, grows our faith, and empowers us to spread God's love to others. It is the love that connects us all and forms us into becoming intimate friends; friends we would gladly lay down our lives for.

Now, when I say lay down our lives, I'm not necessarily talking about dying for our friends, although it could mean that. There are instances across the world where Christian disciples are being martyred because of their faith in Jesus. However, laying one's life down for one's friends could also consist of any time we are willing to put aside our own lives in order to take time to love and serve others. A few examples would include taking time each day to pray for others, to volunteer on Saturdays to hand out food to the hungry, to take the time to teach children about the love of Jesus, or to set aside financial resources to give to the mission of the church.



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Also, it must be stated that, as we renew our commitment to the mission of Jesus' commandment and commission, we may become surprised at where the Holy Spirit may land us into the world. Jesus would often hang out with the lowly and despised in society. The word of God is often found out in the fringes of society. The Holy Spirit will call us to proclaim good news to people who may look and act different from us. But, as we establish loving relationship with them, we will discover that we are all connected because of the love of Jesus. This will lead us to see each other as friends.

So, who are the modern-day gentiles out there in the world whom God is calling us to proclaim the good news to? How is the Holy Spirit calling us to minister to our community? Where do the branches of the holy vine need to grow and expand? Where do the opportunities lie for us to build relationships and make new friends in Christ? All of these questions need much discernment. Thankfully, because we are already friends with Jesus and each other, by the power and leading of the Holy Spirit, we are free to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow wherever he leads us.

Amen.



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