



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 6 (B)

Filled With the Joy of God's Love

[RCL] Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

We hear echoes of Maundy Thursday with John's focus on foot-washing and an astonishing new commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved us. We also hear echoes of Pentecost, with the depiction of an equally astonishing and unexpected outburst of the Holy Spirit amongst Gentiles, who were, up until that moment, considered the quintessential outsiders. As Jesus said one night to Nicodemus, like the wind, the spirit comes from we know not where, and goes we know not where – and it astonishes us right where we are when it comes!

We are still at the Last Supper in John. After washing everyone's feet, Jesus commissions the disciples saying, "You are no longer servants, rather you are my friends." It is possible to mistake this as admission to an exclusive club with new rights and privileges. We are friends of Jesus, too, we might say. Look at us and be jealous, we might think – if not aloud, at least to ourselves. Yet, to do so misses the two-edged sword that is the Word of God – the Word that was with God, the Word that was God, the Word at the beginning.

This friendship with Jesus means to fold us into the Body of Christ, the Christ who comes to dwell among us as one who serves, not one to be served. To serve others with God's steadfast love for all humanity. To seek and serve Christ in all others. We are to serve all, not some, not many, surely not a few, but all others, loving our neighbor as ourselves – as we would like to be served.

It ought to strike us, if it has not already, the astonishing irony of John's story of the Last Supper. Jesus commissions us to be his friends so that his "joy may be in [us], and so [our] joy may be complete," overflowing from our lives into the lives of others – all others. Jesus is filled with joy despite the fact John tells us, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). And yet he remains filled with joy, commissioning those who wish to follow him to go into the world as those who wish to serve others, not be served by others. Such love for one another, such seeking to serve Christ in all persons, is the source of the same joy that fills the Risen Christ; this is an astonishing assertion as he steadfastly walks out of that supper, one step at a time, to carry his cross to Calvary, Golgotha, the Place of the Skull.

It's as if, in those final moments with those who are now to be his friends, Jesus has embodied the Psalmist's call: "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.... Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.... Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, the lands and those who dwell therein. Let the rivers clap their hands, and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, when he comes to judge the earth." Jesus imagines a new world unfolding from the events that are to follow that Last Supper. Jesus imagines his friends will now continue in the midst of God's work: not only the judgment of the world, with all its foibles, problems, and troubles but also the renewal and repair of a broken world, as we become the Body of Christ, bringing his joy of service to others as a new reality for all people! Sing to the Lord a new song, indeed!

If this strikes us as astonishing beyond all knowing and all possibility, today's Word means to remind us that these first friends of Jesus were astonished as well. We hear about Peter, who, prior to the events of today's reading, has had a perplexing vision of what singing to the Lord a new song was to be about. As he is praying, he is hungry. The Lord shows him a vision of all manner of creatures to eat that are not Kosher and says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter says three times, "No, I have never eaten such things." We are meant to remember that this is Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus three times. Peter, whom Jesus asks three times, "Do you love me?" Peter who says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Peter, to whom Jesus says, "Tend my sheep, feed my flock, seek and serve me in all people!"

As Peter emerges from this vision, Cornelius, a centurion, sends men to bring him to his home, where Peter is faced with a house filled with Gentiles, those quintessential outsiders, who want to hear about the Word that had come to dwell among us, with God's steadfast love for all creation. They want to hear of the God to whom even the hills and the rivers and the seas and the lands and all who dwell therein want to sing a new song, a joy-filled song! They long to hear and join the song that declares a renewed world that fears the Lord and desires to enter into his new command to love one another, even as Jesus did, marching toward pain.

Peter begins to speak, and lo and behold! The same spirit that had come upon the disciples in an upper room on Pentecost, that same spirit that turned them into evangelists who could speak about God's steadfast love in Christ Jesus in ways that people from all corners of the earth could understand, that same spirit showed up! Peter begins, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all."

And then it happens. The Holy Spirit comes upon these quintessential outsiders, and suddenly they, too, are extolling God in ways that anyone could understand! Peter and his Jewish, Christ-following friends of Jesus stare in disbelief. So that's what the vision was all about, he must have been thinking. These are not just words I am speaking. God really, truly does not show any partiality whatsoever! And so, what could they do, but baptize this house filled with Gentiles? They would spend the next few days together, filled with the joy of Jesus, with God's steadfast love for all persons: male and female, Jew and Roman, slave and

free. All divisions would need to cease because the repair of the broken world had begun!

God's Word on this day means to ask us: Do we accept Jesus' invitation to become his friends? Do we wish to be served, like the people of this age? Or do we wish to serve? Do we wish to serve even those who are most unlike us, as Peter and the friends of Jesus do? Are we ready to be as astonished as they were that day in the centurion's house to discover that God loves even those most unlike us in every single way? Do we wish to be filled to overflowing with the joy of Jesus, a joy that seeks and serves the Christ in others, all others, no matter what?

Of course, we do! We are those people, like the writer of the First Letter of John, who know the pervasive reality of God's love in Christ Jesus, who, though he was leaving this world to return to the household of God's steadfast love, has made us his friends. We have been made new. We are those people who seek to sing a new song to the Lord our God. We seek to join the chorus of all creation who joyfully sing of the transforming love of God in Christ Jesus. We are those people who have seen and believed the transforming love of God in the death and resurrection of his Son. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

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