

6th Easter - May 9, 2021

First Lutheran, Poughkeepsie

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The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 15th chapter.

Glory to you O Lord.

Jesus said: **“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.”**

The gospel of the Lord

Praise to you O Christ.

Imagine... you’ve come to a critical moment in your life when you realize your days are numbered. Time is running out. And you only have a few precious opportunities left... to say what you need to say to loved ones. I’m sure you would choose your words very carefully. And you would focus on the absolute most critical things.

Jesus has come to that moment in his life in the gospel today. He knows he's about to make that fateful turn toward Jerusalem on his way to the cross. He knew his days were numbered. The time he had left with the disciples was short. So what words did the Son of the living God choose to say? What did Jesus think were the absolute most critical things?

"As the Father has loved me," he said, **"so I love you..."**

Did you hear that? Can we truly hear... that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords... the Alpha and the Omega... the Beginning and the End... the Resurrected and Ascended One... the One seated on the throne at the right hand of the Father... the One who declares that he is **"making all things new"**... said to the disciples then... and to each of us... **"As the Father has loved me, so I love you..."**

Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome... the bearer of mercy, forgiveness and life declares to us, we are loved. Immersed in the fullness of God's immense gracious love. Ahhh...

That was one of the absolute critical things he said in his limited time. Jesus went on to say, **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Love one another. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."**

Maybe you saw a news story from last Sunday of a pick-up truck that was involved in an awful multi-car accident... on a bridge in Maryland. The pick up was severely mangled, totally wrecked, and laying on its side with the back end... including the back seat of the cab hanging off the bridge over the water.

What added to the terror of this horrible accident was that the force of the collision was so great, it ejected a 2 year old (car seat and all) out of the truck. The child plunged 25 feet into the water below.

A witness to the accident immediately dove off the bridge into the water and rescued the little girl. Thankfully, the little girl is ok. She is in stable condition. The rescuer... wanted to remain anonymous. What the rescuer did not know is that the part of the water he dove into was only 4 to 5 feet deep. He could have been seriously injured... or worse.

Jesus said: **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”**

Loving one another... demands care, kindness, mercy, and sometimes risk... laying down one’s life. Putting ourselves on the line for the sake of another. This is another of the absolute critical things Jesus said in his remaining moments with the disciples.

Here’s a third. **“You did not choose me but I chose you.” “You did not choose me but I chose you.”**

I’ve shared with you all in a previous sermon that I’m a grandfather. Something I deeply cherish. My oldest grandson, Oliver, is 12 years old. What if he came up to me next week and said, *“you know what Poppy, I’ve decided... I’ve decided to choose you to be my grandfather.”* Ha! Long before he knew me, I knew him... and loved him from his first breath. Long before he could talk with me and hug me and giggle with me... I cradled him and sang to him and held his hand when he was taking his first steps. I read books to him and played games with him. He had no choice in the matter. He is, and always will be... mine.

“You did not choose me,” Jesus said, **“but I chose you. And I appointed you... to go... and bear fruit... fruit that will last.”** We are loved. We are chosen. And we have holy purpose... to go... bear fruit.. the fruit of love, care, self-sacrifice, generosity, mercy, rescue. To see the need before us... and willingly “dive in”... in God’s name.

Our Synod has long provided an adult discipleship program called “diakonia,” now renamed “Growing in Faith.” And its purpose is just that... to help adults grow in their faith. The Holy Spirit in and through this program has had tremendous influence on many. Your deacon, Deacon Peter Slingerland is one example.

I’m another. I started my first year of diakonia back in the late 1980s. I was so stirred up, I quit after my first year and relocated with my family to the Lutheran seminary in Philadelphia to become a pastor.

Years later, I taught a diakonia class in Pleasantville. It was the visitation class and the final assignment required students to go and do two visits then report a summary of one of them to the class. This class usually gets most of the students anxious because they need to go... out there... into the world and be public about their faith. Something most of us have not needed to do. Faith for most tends to be a private matter.

During the final class each of the students described absolutely amazing, holy visits. (Which, by the way, happens every time I teach the class.)

One student, a very shy, self-proclaimed extreme introvert was simply terrified by the assignment. She described how hard it was for her to step out of her comfort zone and engage others. It took every bit of courage she could muster. The visits went surprisingly well, she said. We might even say they were transformational.

This shy, extreme introverted disciple graduated the diakonia program and... can you imagine... went off to seminary. She is serving a congregation in our synod, now boldly proclaiming the gospel. A few days ago, I sat and listened to her Easter sermon recorded online. It was fantastic. I found myself beaming a big, bright smile and crying at the same time, so moved to see God’s transforming, holy work in our world.

Jesus said: **“As the Father has loved me, so I love you...**

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

“You did not choose me but I chose you.

“And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

As God’s beloved, we all have holy purpose... to go... bear fruit.. the fruit of love, care, self-sacrifice, mercy, rescue. To see the need of others before us... and *dive in*... in God’s name.

It’s not just the work of individuals, it’s the very reason for our existence as the body of Christ, the community of faith.

These past 15 months have been excruciatingly difficult. There’s been lots of pain, loss and upset. But I hope you are feeling as I am, there is growing optimism with vaccines and warmer weather and more opportunities to be with others.

We don’t yet know what life will truly look like as we fully emerge from this awful pandemic. We don’t know how our ministries will be affected.

What ***we do know*** is that the Church, in all its unique expressions, was facing serious issues and concerns before Covid. Weekly attendance, membership and resources have been steadily declining for almost everyone for decades.

According to a recent Gallup poll the number of Americans who consider themselves members of a church, synagogue or mosque... has dropped below 50%. Below 50%. This is the lowest level since 1937 when these statistics started to be tracked. And in 1937 that number was 73%.

The stark reality... is that we can no longer expect people to walk into our churches just because our doors are open. Young parents are not coming back to the church with their little children. Teenage youth are not looking to the church as their social center.

The Christian Church has come to the end of an era. I'm not saying Christianity is over. I'm saying the way we have been church for centuries is no longer working. And our efforts to try to keep doing the same thing we always have... is not the answer.

We must adapt which is causing a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty for congregations and their leaders because we're not sure ... how to move forward. We are afraid... and unsure which direction to go. There are no easy answers or quick fixes for our circumstances. But we are ***not*** without hope.

Those disciples who heard Jesus offer *the absolute critical things* just before his death on the cross, were shocked when they encountered the resurrected Christ in the upper room. Jesus breathed the Spirit's power upon them. Their lives radically changed. Their relationship with God changed. Their priorities and purpose changed. How they interacted with one another and the wider community changed. The Spirit bound them... one to another. They gave powerful witness to the resurrection... to Easter hope through word and deed.

This congregation has been on a quest... a journey. You are working your way through a transition to call another pastor. Good things have been unfolding... which you will hear more about soon.

And even after a pastor settles into this community... this congregation like all the others cannot settle back into anything we've known as "normal." We are at the beginning of a new era in the Church. Church as we've known it is disappearing right before our eyes.

We need to reimagine how to move ahead in new ways. We need to be prayerful... discern the guidance of the Spirit, remember that we are bound, one to another (beyond our addresses) and be courageous to step out in faith taking risks... "diving in"... to be God's love loose in the world... in new ways.

Jesus said: **“As the Father has loved me, so I love you...**

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

“You did not choose me but I chose you.

“And I appointed you to go... and bear fruit... fruit that will last.”

What a blessed privilege and an amazing adventure, O beloved of God!

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!