Faith and Glory: Ascension Sunday, 7 EASTER (Year A) May 24, 2020
Passage: **John 17:1-11** · The Wing of Jesus (St Brendan's, Deer Isle- via ZOOM)

(from a sermon first preached in 2014- seems still quite relevant)

I > Today is Ascension Sunday, following Ascension Day last Thursday. Today, we give pause, we focus our attention on the full impact of Jesus' joining the power and reception of God in his rising up to "Be" at God's right hand. The prayer which he left with his disciples, and also for us today, and which we heard in our Gospel reading just now, is a statement of the full confidence and authority with which Jesus spoke. Let there be no doubt: "(Let them)" he says "**know you**, the only true God, as they know me, whom you have sent… Bring me back to the fullness of **your Glory which I have known with you since BEFORE the world began**." And he prays for us! He continues to pray for us from that place. Let that settle into your hearts just now.

II > Whether consciously or more under the surfaces, we have often worried about the health of our churches today. But the truth of the matter is that there are **more of us now** than ever before. Those twelve became seventy. And the seventy became hundreds. And now those hundreds have become millions.

Indeed, the **past two centuries** have seen the greatest explosion of Christian growth since the days of the early church. There are **more Christians in the world today than there were people in the entire world just a century ago**. So we shouldn't be overly deceived by how anemic the church seems to have become in the United States and Europe. Around the world thousands of new people are finding faith in Christ every day. But **where does the church get the power** that sustains her through all of our worldly lives? First of all, she gets it from **the world's need**. The world desperately needs what you and I have to offer. Whether in far off places or here at home, the world still needs to know the good news which Jesus expresses in our Gospel reading.

It may be difficult for us just now to focus on the larger issues of the needs of the wider world. But in this time of limitations and transformations of our gatherings, it is important to push ourselves to be reminded of such broader dynamics. Italy, apparently, is recovering well from the spread of this deadly virus. Taiwan and New Zealand seem to have found ways to safely avoid shutting down businesses and are carefully monitoring social interaction. In the US, 24 states are now showing alarming increases in the spread of the virus and deaths from it, including many who have been the

most aggressive in lifting restrictions and bans. The issues are enormous, the responses still breaking new ground.

In the midst of such challenges, it's a natural reaction to pull inward and feel isolated (as we are). But there's a second place our faith gets its power: **The fellowship we have together**. The fellowship we need to be cultivating and taking much more time to develop; how we care for and nurture each other in our lives and in our faith.

Pastor **Charles Swindoll** tells a powerful story about an old Marine Corps buddy of his who, to Chuck's surprise, became a Christian after he was discharged. In their conversation, his buddy said: "You know, Chuck, the only thing I still miss is that **old fellowship** I used to have with all the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around and really talk truth to each other. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to admit my faults and talk about my battles where somebody won't frown and make me feel judged."

It wasn't one month later that in his reading Chuck came across this profound paragraph: "The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, **dispensing liquor instead of grace**, escape rather than reality **but** it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the **desire to know and be known**, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers. With all my heart," this writer concludes, "I believe that Christ wants his church to be unshockable, such a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk, I'm stuck, I've had it. I don't know where it's all going.' Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality which our churches too often miss.

"We're the only outfit I know that shoots its wounded," Colson concludes. We can become the most severe, condemning, judgmental, guilt-giving people on the face of planet Earth, and we claim it's in the name of Jesus Christ. And all the while, we may not even know we're doing it. That's the saddest part." (1)

III > So consider that perspective as we reflect on our purpose and function as the body of the Ascended Christ. How do we take the promise of Jesus more fully into our nurture of our relationships? And, as we live in the midst of a GROWING Christian body around the world, how do we live that promise? Are we much aware of the places in which those other Christians live? On

April 14, 2014 almost 300 school girls in Nigeria were kidnaped, rounded up and carted off in trucks from their school in the northern Borno region. They were abducted by a militant, terrorist group called **"<u>Boko Haram</u>"** - a name that literally translates as **"Western education is a sin."** But it is not just Western education that they find unacceptable. The school where these girls were being educated, the girls themselves, represent a threat to the Islamic fundamentalists for no other reason than that they are Christian. This is a "new-but-not-new" series of behaviors. It was a twenty-first century Inquisition. But the tables have been turned and now it is Christian children who are at the center of a political/religiously-fueled rage. Five hundred and twenty-two years after the Spanish Inquisition, we humans are still doing the "same old" thing, the "same-old-same old," just as the Jewish establishment did in Jesus time. We are still people of faith fighting, hurting, and killing each other. Religious persecution takes many forms, in many places. Christians continue to be persecuted in the middle-east; in Syria, in Afghanistan, it takes the shape of Muslims killing massive numbers of other sectarian faith groups, Muslim and otherwise. Remember the prayer of Jesus that I asked you to absorb in the beginning of this time…

Jesus came to unite us. Jesus did not come to separate us or divide us. We can always have different tastes and tribes and traditions. We can also always have a common identity: the love of God promising us ongoing transformation; and the love which we hold and embrace for and from Jesus.

It is a time to look more widely outward; **AND** it is a time to look inward, to look closer to home. Acceptance and love starts next door, not in the next time zone. Acceptance of different opinions starts with those with whom we worship. Acceptance starts at the table of the Last Supper — where Jesus looked out and saw a Judas, and a Peter, and ten other frail and fragile followers, and yet proclaimed to God in prayer that "those whom you gave me from the world . . . **they have <u>kept your word</u>… As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, <u>that they too may be truly sanctified</u>.**"

May we keep those words ever in our ears and hearts,

To the Ascended Christ we give thanks and honor,
in his Spirit and in his <u>promise to</u> and <u>prayer for</u> us.

IIIA > I'd like to leave us with two small stories, from our own time, which I believe link these two directions of faith quite well. The first involves an interview with a woman, stuck at home, who pushed herself to find what

talent or skill she could develop to create some feeling of accomplishment, and also be of some benefit to others. So she had the idea to make greeting cards from old photos, carefully mounting them on cardstock and typing short, inspirational messages on the cards. She makes them freely available, and said of her work: "I feel enormously more worthwhile, and I'm so happy to share my efforts with those whom I may help feel a bit better. We all have gifts we can find and develop, and we should, for all of our benefit."

In the southern part of England, in an area where life is still very rural and most people remember their communal history, one particular community began to work together to revive a lost skill. Beleaguered by the threats of the COVID virus as we all are, they noticed how rapidly food supplies were running out, especially that staple of British diet, flour and bread. So thanks to the skills of an older caretaker of one of the ancient water-driven grist mills, volunteers under his direction got three of the mills operating and milling flour. In the process, they have revived old methods of collecting grains and milling a very pure flour, without any additives or preservatives. Several "craft-bakers," those again practicing traditional ways of creating whole-grain and "unprocessed" breads are now supplying the whole region. Talk about untapped skills! Again, as part of our reaching out, and perhaps in good "Yankee ingenuity," we in our communities, and our faith-groups, can find encouraging efforts to reach each other and find productive solutions.

In the words of Henri Nouwen, catholic theologian and writer:

"The discipline of community makes us persons; that is, people who are **sounding through** to each other (the **Latin personare** means "sounding through") a truth, a beauty, and a love that is greater, fuller, and richer than we ourselves can grasp. In true community we are windows constantly offering each other <u>new views</u> on the mystery of God's presence in our lives. Thus the discipline of community is a true discipline of prayer. It makes us alert to the presence of the Spirit who cries out 'Abba,' Father, among us; and thus prays from the center of our common life. **Community thus is obedience practiced together.** The question is not simply "Where does God lead me as an individual person who tried to do his will?" More basic and more significant is the question "Where does God lead us as a people? [(2)]"

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(1) quote from *How To Be Born Again* (Waco: Word Books, 1977), sermon by King Duncan, *esermons* this date (2014).

(2) Nouwen, *"We Are Windows to God's Love"*