

“Love for the Sake of Joy”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
May 5, 2024

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Acts 10:44-48  
John 15:9-17

Before I dive into today’s sermon, I want to take a step back and look at where we are in the rhythms of our church storytelling and liturgy. It’s been 5 weeks since Easter Sunday. For the first few weeks after Easter, we heard stories of astonishment as Jesus revealed himself, in resurrected form, to his closest followers, both women and men. And then those stories fold into what we call the “farewell discourses” from John’s gospels— that is, Jesus giving both instruction and pastoral care for how they might live after he again leaves them in physical form. His teachings, including the one we heard in John’s gospel today, are preparing the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit, whose arrival we will celebrate on Pentecost Sunday in two weeks. Our Acts readings are already giving us a preview of what life with the Holy Spirit will be like.

Let me add the caveat that this rhythm is of the Western church— our Christian siblings in the Eastern Orthodox Churches— Greek, Russian, Syrian, Georgian, etc— celebrate Easter today. The Eastern church follows a calendar set by Julius Caesar, and is always the first Sunday after the Jewish Passover ends, while the Western church follows the calendar set by Pope Gregory the XIII, and puts Easter after the first full moon that follows the Spring equinox.

When I was a child, a road trip involved a three-voice chorus of “are we there yet?” from my siblings and me in the backseat, while my parent propped a road atlas on his knee and would watch the odometer to know how soon the next turn should be. Now, anyone in the car can just look at the driving app to know how much longer, as well as weigh the importance of a snack or bathroom break over the desire to get to your destination.

So if you are someone who likes to know how we mark time, mark this: we are cradled between Easter, and Pentecost, and along the way, Jesus is offering some intense spiritual nourishment so that we will be prepared for the next great thing God has on offer. Next Sunday, we tell the story of Jesus’ ascension— when he gets whisked away into heaven, and then the disciples have another week of being on their own before they get the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ instruction becomes especially urgent for them, in that time on their own, but also for us today.

Jesus’ period of instruction to the disciples reminds me of the show *Old Enough?* —this is a Japanese TV show translated into English for Netflix. In the show, a parent sends their young child out on their own for an errand, with specific instructions. I will give an example that is probably a mash-up of a couple different episodes I have seen: a mother asks her 3 or 4 year old son to go to the fishmonger to get his favorite cut of sashimi, and then to the fruit market to get four pears. The camera follows the boy from his apartment, down the hilly street, carrying an ice cooler for the fish. He has to get the fishmonger’s attention, say what fish he wants, give

the money, collect the change, find his way to the fruit market, pick out and pay for the pears, and then carry everything up the hill.

There are points where his tasks are so difficult he freezes up or stops to cry. He is nervous talking to the shopkeepers. His pears fall out of the bag, and roll down the hill. His cooler of fish flips open. He mutters instructions to himself, reminding himself of how important it is to bring this food back to his family, telling himself not to be scared. The second time the pears drop, a friendly stranger helps him. In fact, people are friendly and helpful to him the whole way, on the walk and also in the shops. He finally makes it to his apartment. He does not have *exactly* everything his mother asked of him. But she takes him into her arms, and thanks him for what he has done. And together they feast on the food he has brought home. The child feels very proud to have brought this joy to his mother. The mother feels happy and satisfied that she has taught her son to be capable in a big and frightening world— and that the world will also receive him in love, and take care of him with goodness.

While I wasn't sending my child at 4 years old down Fort Lee Road to pick up my prescription from CVS, her favorite mangos from HMart, and a pound of shrimp to make dinner with, I can relate to question of whether we are giving our child the raw materials to make it out there on her own one day, and also the question of whether her community will receive her with goodness and care. I know parents are supposed to intentionally give their children experiences in independence, small pilgrimages of trust, while the parent is still within reach for support.

In a similar way, in his last days before the Ascension, Jesus wants to prepare his followers to go out on their own and practice all the things he has been teaching them. He knows they won't be able to do it perfectly. But he reminds them that if they get lost, to abide in love; Love is the map, and love will show them back to the way he taught them.

Love is a crucial component of what it means to be Christian. There are plenty of other reasons for spirituality: duty, justice, reverence, peace. Some believe that their religion will make them prosperous, and certainly the sociologist Max Weber drew that line in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. As a child, I had a period of cynicism when I suspected that the bible was just made up in a room full of people as a way to control how people behaved and thought. The truth is, as I later learned in seminary, there *were* some gatherings in rooms, and sometimes there were agendas behind the choices of which books to include in the bible. But I do believe that the Holy Spirit not only worked through the choosing of these books to inspire the people there, but also in our reading of what we have, so that the mix of our experiences and needs, mingled with the author's words, as well as everything that moved to bring those words before our eyes and ears, has something holy happening in it, at least some of the time.

Something that Jesus understood is that love is what can help news become good. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." When love is our *commandment*, "we should do nothing, and follow no command, that does not build up our neighbors in love, ourselves in love, and the world in love. In other words, Jesus is calling not

for the sort of forced 'obedience' found in relationships of coercion, but rather the sort found among genuine friends, companions who listen to each other in loving-kindness" (Matthew Meyer Boulton, "Love for the Sake of Joy" in *Salt Lectionary*, April 30, 2024).

Having that lens for love allowed Peter to see the vision God gave him on the roof– the vision of a canopy of all kinds of animals that weren't considered kosher, and the voice that told Peter to kill and eat from these unclean animals– and use that vision as a metaphor that God shows no partiality. That we must not name unclean anyone whom God has called. And so then Peter was able to go to Cornelius, the Gentile, in a posture of love, and on that day the Holy Spirit came upon every relative and friend Cornelius had gathered.

We need that lens of love today.

I have a friend who lives outside of NJ, and she sends her daughter to a private school. At this school, her daughter participated in a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion event that went really poorly. Normally, I think DEI programs are important steps to help build understanding, compassion, connection, and justice in a community. This event unfortunately did just the opposite. A teacher had gathered a class of 6th graders, and put them into pairs. Then the teacher asked the kids to tell their partner reasons why others might judge or dislike them. Now, it's one thing if kids ask to reveal these things about themselves– although, for 12 year olds to open up and put those things on the table feels a little bit over the top. But to name it about the other person? Maybe you can see where this is going... my friend's daughter was told by her partner, "Well, the first thing is that you're Jewish."

For those of us who have been sixth graders before, you can perhaps remember how vulnerable you felt at that age to just about any aspect of your developing identity. But to have a peer *negatively* single out a difference that also has received a history of discrimination, violence, and even genocide? Well, it's far too much for a 12 year old to have to bear on a day of school.

But in the early Christian community, those divisions were apparent and entrenched. People were divided– Jew from Greek, slave from free, male from female– and one could *not* casually associate with the other. It was into this culture that the apostle Peter received that vision that led him to go to the Gentile Cornelius.

Peter begins telling Cornelius and his household that God isn't partial to any one group over another, and tells them the stories of Jesus. As he taught them, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone gathered there in Cornelius' home.

How cool would it be for every 6th, 7th, and 8th grader to know that they are cherished and loved, rather than judged or even despised, because of the ways God has made them unique? How cool would it be if we all could realize that, and then to treat each other as such?

On this day when even the followers of Jesus recognize a different day of rejoicing over his resurrection, it is not that difference that I lament. God does not want or need for us to all be the same. But what we do not realize, is that in order for our joy to be complete, our love has to be complete too.