

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 6

We draw closer to the day of Pentecost and the light of that Spirit shines brighter. Christ, risen from the dead, is present in our lives today by the work of the Spirit. That Spirit is like a great extension cord, bringing us the presence of the Incarnate One. The Spirit is absolutely necessary for this, but what he conveys is not himself but the Savior. The Spirit without Christ is not only incomprehensible, He is not the Savior.

The resurrection of Jesus gives us an abiding love and joy. Those themes are written through these pericopes in large letters. That love transcends all our prior realities and allows us to look at even an enemy differently. I no longer have to be defensive, which takes a lot of energy. I can love, which is a builder of self and others. The fear is driven out and in its place God has put love and its partner joy.

For the preacher these next two weeks can be a bit of a challenge. We are not used to fifty day celebrations. It seems like the Lutheran ethos is better suited to the forty days of penitence than the fifty days of celebration, but this is where the rubber really hits the road for us. You see, we are best defined as Easter people, not Lenten people. Have we somehow forgotten how to celebrate? Are we too busy? Are we too focused on results so that we cannot simply let the relationship be which God has wrought in Jesus? What is up with us? A sense of discontent drives us, it seems. We want the season to get on and do something, when we are right now called simply to be something. We think that we are somehow being slothful or indolent or insufficiently focused if we just party.

My son found a great website a little while ago about a little village on an island in the Aegean which celebrated Easter by shooting homemade rockets at the two churches in town. On Google video search type in “Easter Rocket War” and you will find multiple YouTube sites which will let you see this. It is bizarre, but I think it says something about joy. (I also thought it would be fun to do with the Seventh Day Adventists who are just down the street from my church. This could be a moment when our Germanic perfectionist heritage and penchant for making rockets might serve us well.) Celebrations are wild and almost dangerous things. Do we ever celebrate like that? If the Resurrection doesn’t move us to such a celebration, what does that say about us? What would move us to such joy? I know that we celebrated like that at the end of WWII, I have seen the pictures.

These two weeks remaining in the Eastertide before the Feast of Pentecost may seem like an old story we have perhaps heard too often. Resist that. The presence of the living Christ remains an incredibly exciting and inspiring thing. There is an adventure to the orthodox faith which these weeks give us a chance to explore in great depth.

This is not a matter of indifference for us. We all know this truth: our congregations are often struggling with inactive and complacent members. 80% of the work gets done by 20% of the

people. Can you imagine what a congregation in which 80% of the people were actually engaged? How do we envision this, preach about it, and call for it?

The Easter message proclaimed today is something that has the power to totally transform us into a person who has the magnetic joy and peace to which the world would flock. Most likely at the proclamation of the resurrection this Sunday, however, we and our parishioners will either yawn at this message or look at our watch and wonder when we will really get to something important. We are so busy “doing church” that we don’t have time to be the people of radiant joy and love. Our lives have gotten so compartmentalized, we are so busy the rest of the week, that we believe that church should be busy-ness as well. Our faith has ceased to in-form our whole life, now our whole life in-forms our faith. That is not a good exchange.

What will it take for us preach a message which proclaims that simple “being” which Christ creates today? How can we capture every moment of every day so that all of them are Christ’s moments. How is it that the dad who coordinates his kid’s soccer team as a coach cannot give a week to VBS? Do we need to see that the soccer team is a ministry too? How do we capture that?

In the past some have taken issue with what I am saying. We suggest that need to be Easter people – but we are also Lutherans that proclaim a theology of the cross. Are these two things at odds? How do we make the proclamation of Easter fit inside the fact that we are also people who adhere to a theology of the cross? You don’t have to just trust me on this one. I refer you to an excellent article published in the *Concordia Journal* of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (Vol 40.2 Spring, 2014, pp. 113-131.) If you want online access to this, you can get it through the CSL website.

1. This is a false tension in a sense. We cannot be Easter people without Good Friday. We get to Easter through Good Friday.
2. The only reason we are people who observe/celebrate the cross is because of Easter. Resurrection belongs at the center of our faith – the Bible speaks of God vindicating Christ through his resurrection and demonstrating Christ to us through resurrection (Rom. 1).
3. The theology of the cross is contrasted not with Easter but with the theology of Glory which suggests that God has reacted to my sacrifice or action. The theology of the cross is the opposite of a vending machine God who is responding to me or my efforts.
4. Theology of the cross says that we are dead, helpless, and incapable of approaching God. God’s love responds to my need, not my effort. My need is nowhere more clear than it is in the grave, where I am helplessly trapped. Resurrection is God liberating me from that dark pit.
5. A theology of the cross without Easter, however, is deficient. Easter is the proclamation that despite the fact that I cannot affect any reaction from God, God has still given the very thing that I need. The Lutheran who insists on the fact that we are helpless and

miserable sinners and who never recognizes and never rejoices in the gift given to us is denying Grace in a sense.

6. The theology of the cross gives joy to our Easter. An Easter without the theology of the cross is vacated of all meaning. A theology of the cross without Easter is a denial of the gift.
7. Therefore: We are Easter people and that is not a contradiction of the theology of the cross. We approach all the crosses in the hope which Easter gives us. The cross reminds us that we are not in charge. We are not calling the shots here and we cannot think that we are controlling this situation. But we also know that dying is but a precursor to resurrection. That there is no cross to bear which overwhelms the love and Spirit which God has given to us in Christ. No one and no thing can separate us from that love in Christ, not death, not the power of hell. (Romans 8)

Collect of the Day

O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Grant that we may think, do, and accomplish.... Just that, but that seems like so much, doesn't it? After all, I have a hard enough time getting through a meeting, through a simply little thing like saying the Lord's Prayer without my mind wandering. And even when I do get a few moments of clarity and think a few good things, then my hands betray me, my fears overwhelm me, and I am paralyzed, over-analyzed, and accomplish so little.

If, on the rare occasion, something actual does get done, my immediate response seems to be that I would jump on the idea and take the credit which belongs to God. In last week's metaphor, I am thinking that I am pretty good stuff because I have born some fruit, but really that is just the energy of the vine flowing in and through me, we are back to that old man's way of thinking again, aren't we?

I hold that one of the keys of this prayer is to drop the semicolon after "them" in the second line. That one's whole life is through Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Father and Holy Spirit, is probably the antidote to the circular mess I describe above. It seems that we are in a closed sin loop sometimes and we simply need it broken. We need to derive the source and the goal of our faith from somewhere other than our own little universe.

I should warn you that such thinking is dangerous. Jesus tends to think radical and dangerous things. Institutions and other proponents of the status quo often find him unsettling and the more one thinks his thoughts the more dicey things can be. As one of my colleagues once suggested to a group of confirmands, "So you want to be a Christian, I hope you look good on wood!" Jesus

would have us start thinking that everyone is a person, everyone is not merely as valuable as I am, but each of us is worth the whole universe because the blood of the creator was spilt on a Judean hillside for that person. A life which thinks those thoughts will be dangerous indeed as Peter finds out when he visits the house of Cornelius. It upsets the nice safe world view of some folks. They won't like it. They may take it out on you.

The merciful guidance to accomplish those things is another issue entirely. That is akin to asking God to guide the surgeon's hand. Personally I would rather the man was operating on someone else. There is no such thing as minor surgery when I am the patient, it is always major when I am the guy getting operated upon. Asking God to mercifully guide us so that we accomplish the things which we ought to be thinking might not be terribly wise, at least from the perspective of the world. It might hurt. I wonder if we really know what we are praying for sometimes. God's mercy sometimes cuts out the cancerous parts of our lives that are preventing us from actually do these things. His guidance is often administered with that shepherd's staff we saw a couple of weeks ago. A whack on the head might be just what turns a wayward sheep around. Jesus exhorts us to love one another. It sounds rather simple until you try it. Does he really mean that guy? That one over there, the one who has made my life miserable? Yes, he does. It means that my own pride, my own vanity, my precious ideas might just have to go. I might have to don a towel, touch a leper, listen to that idiot and not think that he is an idiot the whole time he is talking.

Readings

Acts 10:34-48

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for

baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

When you get to heaven, do you suppose there will be more people than you expect to see or less?

As we noted last week, as we draw nearer to the Feast of Pentecost the readings start to reflect that day's light. Today Peter speaks to the household of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion to whom God had sent him from Joppa. Peter had seen a vision of all sorts of unclean animals and had been bidden to eat them, something which transgressed his Jewish upbringing. These were ham and cheese sandwiches, shrimp platters, and other non-kosher things. God says “don't call unclean what God has called clean.” Three times this vision comes and then the knock at the door asking Peter to come to Cornelius' house.

The real issue here is not about food; although, that was also huge for a Jewish person. As I make allowances on the communion paten for the gluten free, dairy free, vegan, vegetarian crowd, I am wondering if food is not becoming a big thing for us again. The real issue is that God has in Christ declared all the Gentiles just as clean as the Jews. It is no longer based on the ancestral relationship with Abraham, but on the faith of Jesus, shared across those former boundaries. Peter is about to experience just how radical God is really thinking here. Or is it radical? In fact, if you look at the promise that God made to Abraham those many years ago he has always been talking about a blessing for all nations and families of the earth. Through Isaiah he called them a light to the nations. The history of God's people is replete with examples: Ruth the Moabite, Tamar the wife of Judah's son, Sheba of Ethiopia, Uriah the Hittite, and many more. God has always been thinking this way, but God's people have struggled to see the world with Him.

This text speaks of Peter's mind being opened to something that God has always had in mind. He now understands. Thus we prayed for right thinking in the collect for this day. Peter understands that God shows no favoritism. That was the point of that vision from God involving the food. But then, in the speaking of this sermon, God reinforces that right thinking, the Holy Spirit is poured out on Cornelius and his household. This is the very presence of God – given to Gentiles who are not proselytes to the Jewish faith first, who are not keeping the kosher laws. There is nothing else to be done for it, these pork-eating, Sabbath-working, uncircumcised gentiles get baptism like the rest of us. Ugh, even though these guys are Romans, a centurion no less. One does not get much farther away from the Jewish ethos than a Roman Centurion. This is why the Gospels tell us the story of Jesus healing another Centurion's servant in Matthew 8 and its parallel in Luke 7. God, in his strange and wonderful wisdom, loves the whole lot of the human race. You can only imagine how hard that was for Peter. It is hard for me too when I think of the Muslims who are slaughtering Christians in the Middle East or the fellow at my office whom I loathe.

Of course, this story begs us to ask who is outside for us and who is outside for the members of our congregations. Who feels excluded if they show up at our church for a wedding or a funeral or just on a Sunday morning? We would all like to think that we welcome all inside, but is it so? If you have not read it, you might just want to think about a book called “UnChristian” by one of the researchers at the Barna institute. The perception he finds of Christianity which operates in the younger generation today, both those inside and outside the Church is pretty damning and brutal, even if they are untrue as applied to your own congregation. It doesn’t make much difference if the perception is true or not, in those situation. I shudder when I drive by some of the moveable type church signs I see and wonder how folks outside the church must read those things. I remember one in Roseburg just before Mother’s day in which they praised mothers and spoke of them as a gift from God. I remember wondering what all the children of abusive parents thought when they drove by that sign. What did those whose mothers had died or the people had been given up for adoption think? What did the woman who could not have children think? It was like the guy who wrote it had only one sort of person in mind and could not think outside that conceptual box.

This reading will challenge us to look carefully at the way our congregation presents itself. Is it really just a likeminded voluntary association? If you are not likeminded are you reminded not to stay? Are we really a Christ-minded community, looking upon the hurt, lost, hungry, and sick with a great compassion which moves us? Or are we a country club for folks from a similar ethos, a similar socio-economic stratus, people who look and think like us. I think that question can be asked to the lily white parish and the all black parish and the Latino parish. This took a while for Peter and the men who were with him to get through his heads, and every generation struggles with it. It is hard to love the homeless guy, it is dangerous perhaps to love the homosexual, or to befriend the prostitute. But if we really listen to what Jesus says, is there another way?

I think the real message here is actually found in the last paragraph. Peter was not alone in Cornelius’ house. He was with good Jewish guys, men who were shocked at this and would be returning to Jerusalem and would talk. I see Peter looking around at them and asking implicitly – “What will we say when we get back to Jerusalem and the more reactionary types hear about this?” He essentially asks their permission to believe what is right in front of them and act on it. This really is Peter’s finest hour. This was incredibly brave of him to do.

Psalm 98

¹Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

² The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together

⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Anyone feel up to a little Christmas music today? This psalm has been paraphrased famously by Isaac Watts. You know it much better as "Joy to the World."

One of the things the UnChurchd book I referenced above says about the way we are perceived is that we are judgmental. Many young people today are tribal, that means they value their friendships and the close relationships they have over everything else. When the Church says that homosexuals are wrong, and their circle of friends includes a homosexual, they will choose their friend over the church every time.

How do we run that last verse of the psalm? It says that God comes to judge the world with righteousness? The world rejoices at that, the sea roars, the rivers clap their hands, the hills sing together for joy. God comes to judge! Yahoo!/? Why does that sound so odd to us? How do we understand that judging work of God? Is our own misunderstanding perhaps part of the reason we are so judgmental or at least perceived as judgmental? Does God judge not our sins, because they were dealt with in Christ; rather, does God judge his own work? Is that the reason we consider the judgement of God and rejoice? It is Jesus who comes as judge to apply the forgiveness which he won.

Perhaps the answer to those questions is found earlier in the text when it says that God has remembered his steadfast love. How is that different from the judgment? If it is not different, how

then do we portray judgment? I spend a great deal of my time with young people reading the New and Old Testaments. They can be quite guarded with me. I am a professor after all. But after a while they will open up. It is interesting working with young people today. They are not adverse to someone stating what they believe. You are welcome to state that you think homosexuality transgresses the bible. Just don't do it in a morally superior way. Don't suggest that because you are not homosexual you have a better shot at the favor of God. Rather, befriend a homosexual. That's what Jesus did when he welcomed the sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors to his side. He did not say that their sins were not sins, he did not call evil good, he simply said that sin was not the only part of the story. God's love was the other part and it was by far more important. It was the part of the story they needed to hear. Is that the judgment which we anticipate with rejoicing, both on our part and the part of the other?

I John 5:1-8

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. ⁹*If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son.* ¹⁰*Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son.* ¹¹*And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* ¹²*Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

Do you find that your head spins after reading too much John? Mine does. Everyone who believes has been born of God. OK, that makes sense. And everyone who loves the Father loves whatever has been born of him. So, how do you love what has been born of the Father, that is everyone who believes? You love God and his commands. Love them, not just do them, but love them. For the love of God is all about keeping the commandments, and those commandments are not burdensome. (Are John and I really talking about the same commandments here?)

Does that mean if I don't keep the commandments, I am not loving God, and if I am not loving God is that born of my disbelief? And if I am not believing am I not born of God? No wonder I cannot keep those commandments.

This line of reasoning will result in despair.

I don't think that is where John wants us to go. Let me take a stab at another way to read this, perhaps you will have a better one. This all hinges on the incarnation. Whoever believes that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, the human being, is the Son of God, that one is born of God. The denial of the divinity of Jesus or the humanity of Christ is not born of God, and I believe there are really only two options there when it comes to lineage in John's view. One is either born of God or of the devil.

If you love the father, you also love his children, and those children of course would be anyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. We love those children when we keep the commandments of God. But then it gets all weird on us. The commands are not burdensome. The heck they aren't. Have you tried going an hour without sinning, a day?

But that might not be quite what John has in mind. The commandment to love one another is a relationship command, not a purity command. What I mean by that is that in the Old Testament we are often exhorted to keep all the commandments, laws, statutes, decrees, etc of the Torah. But when you go in and actually read that Torah it is mostly about how to restore the broken relationship through the sacrificial system. Loving the brother is not really about keeping all the commandments, but it is about loving the brother. That means remaining in that relationship which God has established. We will still sin, John has already acknowledged that (I John 1:8-10). But the Christian has a way to deal with that, it's called repentance and forgiveness. That is loving the brother and that is keeping the divine command. This is not some impossible to keep holiness code which lays on us a burden which is impossible to keep, in the same way that the Sermon on the Mount crushes under its demands.

This is the victory that overcomes the world itself: the love expressed in forgiveness. It is not a perfect life which is described, but a perfect solution to our profoundly imperfect lives which is being described here. The preacher may want to ask what is it about believing that Jesus is the Son of God that enables us to overcome the world. When I believe in Jesus – the sins of my neighbor change for me. They are already overcome. The world would have me at best perhaps understand those sins, but it would understand if I wanted to get even. But that is not overcoming those sins. They are still there. Jesus has removed them. When I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, I can look at any evil and know that He is bigger than the bad. That means I can look at the brother who has hurt me, the neighbor, the fellow congregant or the unbeliever down the street, God has died for that sin. That empowers me to overcome the world. I don't have to get even. I get to forgive the sin. That is actually much better than getting even. I am a herald of God's forgiveness, a proclaimer of this truth. I forgive people. That burden is on Jesus, not me. That is why it is not burdensome. He has borne that burden.

The second paragraph is a little easier: it is so sacramental. We know very little about the first century congregations or what their worship was like, but I always conjecture from this that they were profoundly sacramental. We know that they were later. The Spirit, the water and the blood

all testify. To what do they testify? They testify to the real death that Jesus died, the blood and water that ran out of his side is the very blood of the sacrament, the very water of our baptism. Christ has become a real human being to redeem real human beings. For some reason he loves the hairless apes we have become.

John 15:9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ *Since* you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Notice the little change I made in the first word of verse 10. This is actually somewhat permissible in Greek; although, the word is “if” and the translators of your ESV have not erred. But the Greek word also has the sense of a manifestation of something. “If the window is wet, it must be raining.” If you keep my commandments, ...” may not be questioning the keeping but noticing it like noticing the wet window as a way to know that it is raining.

I think John is talking about a new sort of community, the very community which existed in his first century congregation. They forgave one another. Sins were dealt with in a new way from the world. The world only had the tools of vengeance, understanding, and grudge-bearing. John says you have another tool at your disposal – forgiveness.

This is the perfect text to match up with the Epistle reading. This follows right on the heels of last week’s Gospel lesson, so if you remember any of that sermon, you may want to try and build on it. If you used the abiding imagery in your sermon on Sunday, you will want to build on this week. If you did something else, you will want to hit abiding this week.

The Greek word here is (meno) μένω which has the basic meaning of staying put, remaining in a place. This what you would say to your dog when telling him to “stay!” but it is also what is used to describe Jesus on the cross when they did not want him to “remain” on the cross over the Sabbath. The stones of the Temple will not remain on top of one another according to Jesus in Matthew 24. Paul says that a veil remains over the eyes of the Jews in II Corinthians 3.

But the word also has a figurative meaning and since this is highly figurative language (“I am the vine and you are the branches” has to be read figuratively) we will want to consider this

meaning of the world. We do much the same thing when we would say “he remained a Democrat for his whole life.” In this sense, and the dictionary notes that this is the favorite sense of John, the word is best translated as “remain, continue, abide” Jesus remains a priest forever in Hebrews. It often suggests permanence or durability. To remain in something is most often contrasted with flip-flopping sort of behavior. We remain in the love of God, He remains in us. We remain in what we have learned and in other places some remain in darkness and even death. For John this word often refers to a deep, inward, enduring personal communion with God.

The preacher will want to remember today that John exhorts us to love and joy in this text. The love is God’s love, communicated to us through Jesus, but which takes concrete shape in the lives of Christian people when they speak, interact, and care for one another and this world. That love in turn results in joy. Have you ever wept tears of joy upon the restoration of a friendship through forgiveness? If you haven’t you really ought to try it sometime. This is one of the foundational passages for Augustine’s rather interesting hermeneutic. (You can read this in Augustine’s very accessible and fascinating text called “Teaching the Faith.” I recommend the translation from New City Press which was published in 1996.) Augustine did not say that the content of the interpretation was most important, the real criterion for judging an interpretation of a text was whether it resulted love, either love of God or love of fellow man. If it resulted in love, even if it was not what the author had intended to say, it was a good interpretation. (This would have driven my hermeneutics prof nuts in seminary!)

Jesus commands these things so that we might love one another. Here’s a novel thought, what if we evaluated our congregations on the basis of love and joy instead of budgets, baptismal headcounts, and other institutional indicators. Now, mind you, I am all for baptisms and sacrificial giving to the mission and ministry of God’s kingdom, but I bet if we paid more attention to the love and joy we would see both giving and baptisms skyrocket all by themselves without even trying. What if we simply asked the questions: how can we love one another better? How can we rejoice together? What if we structured our parish into a Love committee and a Joy committee or better yet, left out the whole committee structure and styled all events as love and/or joy events? How would that be different? Would it by its very nature be evangelistic? Would we see people give freely and generously to such a ministry?

Just a hair brained idea from a guy who is not currently serving a congregation. Take it for what it’s worth. (Not much!)

As I mentioned in my discussion of the epistle reading, I believe that the remaining, or abiding in Jesus and his love is not about being a perfect person, but about being a person infused with God’s forgiving love. (I know that sounds Roman Catholic, but the imagery is in the text.) This is not about always getting this right, but it is about knowing what to do with my sin when I completely mess up a relationship, as I am wont to do. I have an advocate, a redeemer, a savior, a lover of my soul who can make something even of my worst messes.

I think our culture does not get this at all. Did any of you watch the relatively recent film version of “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” by C. S. Lewis? The special effects are great, the centaurs are especially cool. But what I found most disturbing was the depiction of the Edmund character. He was sympathetically portrayed. The film opens with a bombing scene, Edmund is caught in the house, trying to save a photo of his father who is off fighting in the war. They barely make it into the shelter and Peter and Edmund have a fight. None of this is in the book. This is wholly a character development of the Edmund character by the director and screenwriters. .

In the book, Edmund is a complete stinker. His betrayal of his siblings is covetous, greedy, foolish, and evil. He is a twisted little person. In the film he is a traumatized young man who is clutching the picture of his absent father (Freud anyone?) Thus when Aslan dies for him at the end of the movie, it is a perfectly acceptable thing to do. Of course he dies for Edmund, poor kid. But that is not the way that Lewis tells that story. The director of LW&W wants us to understand Edmund and that is enough. It makes the central act comprehensible, but it also cheapens it.

The whole point of forgiveness is that it is not comprehensible, it defies understanding. Thus, the film is about something else. Understanding is good, I like understanding and I believe that the world would be a better place if we all just tried to understand a little more. But it is not forgiveness. Forgiveness is the application of Christ’s death to the brokenness of the world, healing the broken. If I understand you sin, I may maintain my relationship with you, but I will not build it that way. I can only restore it, if I am good at my understanding, to what it was before. But if I forgive your sin, I open the floodgates of love. That builds relationships, intensifies them, and draws us closer to one another, increasing our joy. What is more, understanding always has a serious limitation. I cannot understand some really painful things. I cannot understand a cheating spouse, or the reason a child has died, or why an athlete has been left paralyzed, and if I have only practiced understanding, on those days I will have no choice but to lash out, to be vengeful, to carry around the terrible hurt and grudge for the rest of my life. I have not learned to forgive.

Jesus calls the disciples “friends” and that word needs a little explanation. In the Roman context a friend was a very special relationship. Romans were intensely competitive. They did not trust anyone, except a very small and close inner circle whom they would call “friend” “Amicus.”

We of course live in a Facebook age in which we “friend” one another rather casually. Jesus is speaking of an intense relationship in which people trust each other totally. We may need to explain that for our people. I really think the Quakers ruined this for us. They started calling everyone “friend” in the 1700’s.

Law

1. “Is Easter ever going to be over? My restless nature rebels at this same message. Yes, I know he has risen, I will retort with the perfunctory ‘He has risen indeed, Alleluia.’ Now can we get onto something important?”
2. The preceding sentiment really a reflection of my flawed relationship. Christ exhorts me to abide in him and I am not entirely certain I am there. How can I stay there? I don’t feel like I am there? I long for the peace that I think is part of being there. My life doesn’t feel right celebrating. There is too much that is simply not right about it. It is like celebrating a birthday when someone you love is dying in the hospital. Aren’t you supposed to be sad that day?
3. And all this has me firmly gazing at my navel. Ugh, something else I am supposed to do. Now I can see that my problems are partially at least due to my own self absorption, but what do I do about that? I cannot get my own life straightened out, what can I do for a neighbor?
4. All this has rather sucked the joy of my life, and made me crabby and grumpy. I look at my neighbor as competitor who is beating me at this living thing. I don’t really have room for more people in my cramped little world, especially for folks who don’t think like I do or who don’t look like I do or don’t act like want them to act.
5. You want me to celebrate Easter!?! Give me money and I will celebrate – Easter? Nah!

Gospel

1. Christ, living and loving, makes himself present in my world today, to shatter my preconceptions and upend my world. It might not be comfortable, but it is really good thing.
2. His presence is not mediated by my effort at all. He has made himself present in my life through water applied and body and blood consumed. He is present in the people around me and the blessings showered down upon me. This is a reality which gives me a reason for joy no matter what my life is going through right now. Even the dying friend is in his loving hands.
3. One of the greatest recipes for gloomy depression is to open up your horizons and help another person. Jesus smashes my cramped little world, opening my eyes to see that his resources are fully at my disposal for the blessing and joy of my neighbor. Jesus wants me to open my eyes, and he is the very Light of the World, the great healer of the blind.
4. Now, surprisingly, the very thing I thought I did not have time to do, the thing I figured I had no energy to do, has become the thing which gives me the greatest joy. I was sure that my world was collapsing down on me, now I see that it was the just the walls that

had kept me in a dingy little place. Peter learned that God loved the gentiles, I see today that God shows no favoritism. He even loves Norwegians.

5. He is risen indeed! Alleuia!

Sermon Ideas

1. Living with the Victory of Christ (Epistle Series – that the victory of Christ would find expression in the hearer’s life through strong relationships, lived out in active and intentional forgiveness.)

This sermon might also draw a little on the Gospel reading for today. There we spoke of a loving congregation which measured itself on the measuring sticks of Joy and Love. It was not counting offerings, attendance, or other traditional measures of a congregation’s health. It was asking how we loved one another and how we rejoiced together. Would that be a far more attractive to the world in which we live than what we are doing right now?

At its heart, this sermon will want to address the core of this idea and that is of course the work of Christ in our lives. I would suggest that the clearest exposition of that is forgiveness today. Not only because most people don’t understand it but it is also something which I think this world needs. It needs communities of congregations that practice forgiveness, real forgiveness, regularly. We were struck as well that Jesus’ love is for his enemies. We have lots of folks who assert they are our enemies. ISIS and Atheists all want us to go away. But Jesus loved those who pounded the nails and the folks who chanted “crucify!” Christians really have no enemies. Yes there are those who declare themselves my enemy and the soldier who defends or the policeman who uses deadly force in order to protect the public has not done wrong. But the Christian who gloats over the death of these enemies has missed the point. Jesus died even for the folks of whom I am afraid.

We also noted in the discussion that the world has defined love with a narrative which is not biblical at all. The default narrative behind the word love which most will bring to church involves kittens, hearts, and cuteness. We will want to talk about the woman in Baltimore who came down to the riots and grabbed her sixteen year old son by the ear and hauled him home. Love is not a feeling but an action. This woman loved her son by embarrassing him and not caring about how he felt but about the fact that he was doing something stupid and might just get himself killed. So she did something for him.

When we forgive, Christ’s victory over sin is clearly seen in our fellowship and in our lives. We become the living proclamation of Christ’s victory. It is not a victory of long

ago, but it is a victory over the sins that plague all human lives today. When I forgive them, I am really plugging into that work of Christ. When I deal with them with the feeble resources of the world, understanding and grudge-bearing, I am obscuring Christ's victory at best, more likely I am denying it.

The hard thing will be for the sea change in ethos and attitudes this will mean for many in our parishes who have completely inculturated their faith. We understand being American is to be Christian and so the differentiation between the larger culture and the ways of the Christian faith are not always comfortable for us. We need to say that the culture in which we live has a really messed up way to deal with problems and sins. We have a better way and we need to start living it out. That way is not vengeance or anger, it is not understanding the psychology of the evil doer, but it is forgiveness. That forgiveness is spoken and applied, it frees both the perpetrator and the one who has been wronged from all sorts of things, including the need to get even. But more importantly it applies the love of God to this very situation I am living in.

This opens the doors for love where sin had shut them tight. This opens the doors to joy when sin's suffering and pain had clamped down upon us. This is the community John envisions in the Gospel and Epistle readings. This is living with the victory of Christ.

2. And the walls came tumbling down (Acts and Epistle - That the hearer would experience Christ's eye opening and life changing work as He not me defines who is "in" and who is "out" of this glorious kingdom of God.)

We are all familiar with the story of the fall of Jericho and the story of how God brought down the walls in the days of Joshua. It was a moment of great victory. Today, we see that same God tearing down walls just as stout as those which surrounded Jericho. Jericho's walls kept the Israelites out and prevented them from conquering the land. But today the walls which surround the people of God keep us and our gaze inside the dingy confines of a world much too small for the love of God. Peter was sure that the limits of God's love were well known. He loved the one who kept the Torah, the Old Testament law, the circumcised, the kosher eater, the Sabbath honoring sorts of people. Yes, Jesus died for all, but that was an invitation for the Gentiles to leave their darkened ways and join Pete in dining on an MLT (mutton, lettuce, and tomato) sandwich. But God had a much larger vision, a vision which Jesus had articulated long before. It isn't what goes into a man that makes him unclean, but what comes out of the mouth, the contents of the heart. God has rendered all men clean in Christ, even the ones whose life and decisions, whose habits and hygiene you find repulsive. This is upsetting to us, but it is also liberating to us, and gives us a chance to see the love of Christ at work. Peter would see the very Spirit of God fall on unlikely people and get to see the kingdom of God come to a whole household. Whom does God direct your attention today to see them first and

foremost as a child of God for whom Jesus has died and been raised to life again? It is not easy to do this, which is why Jesus is right here today to open your eyes and change your heart just as he did with Peter those many years ago.

And John too, we are empowered to overcome the world, to break down the walls which sin would erect between us. Jesus is the Son of God – he has died for that sin. I have overcome the wall, the relationship is restored.

3. That our joy may be full, the Spirit and the water and the blood all testify to us. (Gospel and Epistle - That the hearer would reach out and touch the Christ who is in their neighbor, filled with Christ's real and physical love for the real and physical people who are all around us.)

Being a good Lutheran, we know that God loves us. But with all those “if” statements in the Gospel lesson, we need to be reminded of that. Jesus has chosen us, he has appointed us, he has called us friends, not servants, but friends. That cannot change; he who is the very creator of heaven and earth has spoken it, even if that old man has failed to keep a few commandments. We have been baptized after all. He abides in us. He promises that. We are the branches connected to the vine. We have touched the very love of God. We taste that love when we drink from that chalice and sink our teeth into that wafer (hold that wafer thought, though, we have several weeks of John 6 later this summer). We experience the love of Christ in the mother who held us on her lap and read us those arch books when we were kids and the father who taught us to be honest and decent folk. It is mother's day this year, so perhaps this is the launching point for us. If it wasn't our parents who did that, someone did. Notice that is all very physical stuff very relational. There is a reason for that. Jesus made this world; all things were made through him. He loves it. He loves every sinner, every rock, every tree, and every breath of air. And so he comes to us in these things and they along with the Spirit of God testify to a very simple truth: God cares. He sent his Son to die a physical death to redeem this physical world. Today you and I are the manifestations of that real love God has for this world. This is not just a piece of nice sentiment, either. He means it. When we love with his love, it is potent. He works through us, he loves through us. In fact this love he has planted in us the very secret to the power of the universe, it conquers the world itself. Sin is no barrier; Jesus blood carried that guilt for us. No hurt is bigger than his healing. No enemy is bigger than his reconciliation. My whole life is filled with is awesome potentiality. When I hold the hand of a person in the hospital and say a prayer, God is in the room, lifting them up to bear this pain, to endure this time of trial. When I confront my adversary, I see not only the hurt he has done, but also the forgiveness which Jesus has wrought. The sin is already forgiven before I ever enter the room and open my mouth. Now I can see him for what he is. All that serves to cast my whole life in joy. What can trouble me now? Christ has redeemed it all.

Ascension Day May 10

Almighty God, as Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also ascend in heart and mind and continually dwell there with Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

This day gets shorted in our world of Sunday only worship. The 40th day of the Eastertide falls on a Thursday every year.

The preacher has a couple of options. He could acknowledge the day at the close of the service on the 6th Sunday after Easter. He could also acknowledge the day at the opening of the 7th Sunday. This might involve reading the Lukan account of the Ascension and singing an ascension hymn either to open or close the service.

Of course, one could also conduct a service on Ascension Day. That would be best, but would anyone be there but me and my wife? Not sure about my wife either sometimes.

In any event, we have to find a way not to lose the theology of Ascension.

Ascension is not about the real absence of Christ, which is how our people see it too often, as though Jesus floated off to another place and we are waiting for him to return. At the Marburg Colloquy Luther told Zwingli, who had proposed that Jesus was not in the sacrament because the Ascension depicted him leaving, that only an ignorant pig would exegete Luke that way. (Luther was not always pleasant when it came to talking theology – he admitted as much.) Luke seems determined to deny that sort of thinking as well, just not quite as pugnaciously.

Ascension forces us to ask the question of where Jesus went. How is it that we assert his resurrection but cannot “see” him? In the chapters which follow the Ascension story in Acts Luke seems to be rather clear. The Disciples start doing all the things that Jesus did. They heal



the sick and lame, they open the eyes of the blind, cast out demons, and even raise the dead. They are persecuted by the same Sanhedrin and when they die, in the case of Stephen, they have the very same words as Jesus upon their lips. When Jesus confronts Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus, he does not ask him why Saul is harming his people, he asks, “Why are you persecuting me?”

Luke’s answer to the “where did he go” question seems rather clear. Jesus is found in the people who bear his name and are filled with this Holy Spirit. If you want to point to Jesus, point to the man or woman who is forgiving, loving, teaching, healing, being persecuted, or otherwise engaged in the Jesus activity.

Unfortunately we have latched onto the levitating Jesus pictures which abound and have lost sight of what I think was Luke’s greater message, namely that Jesus did not really leave. This is why the Bible most consistently speaks not of Jesus arrival on the last day but his revealing on the last day. He is here all along. In ignoring this message of Luke, we have become functional deists who imagine Jesus to be far away in heaven. My students describe him as some ultimate NSA operative, sitting in heaven while he watches us on a billion TV screens, but never actually acting.

When Zwingli asked Luther where Luther thought Jesus had gone, Luther said, “Into the Cosmos!” This would make some Lutherans pucker a little and it was not really picked up later Lutheran theologians, but you might find Luther’s colleague in Nuremberg, Andreas Osiander’s ideas, interesting.

I like to use this little day to speak of the presence of Christ. He is in our lives through vocation, as he dons us like a mask to answer the prayers of hungry, sick, or otherwise needy people. Through us he cares for people. He does his shepherding thing through his faith-filled people. Of course one can also speak of the sacramental presence of Christ, but I think Ascension needs to push us to see Christ in the ordinary, the mundane, and the regular parts of our lives.