



May 7th, 2023 • Holy Communion • In-Person and Online Worship

“What Do You See: A New Community Formed by Love”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Across the Sundays of Eastertide, we’ve been exploring some of the basics about what we believe and how we live in light of what happened on that first Easter morning. What is Christian faith, centered in the power of our Resurrected Lord?

We’ve talked about a faith that is big enough and strong enough to embrace all of who we are—our convictions and our questions, our acclamations, and even our doubts. For our Risen Savior, in the honest light of who we are, says to us: “Peace. Do not let your hearts be troubled....in my Father’s house are many dwelling places.”

And we’ve seen that our Easter faith is also about a God we can trust, a resurrected Savior who is our Good Shepherd. We ground our faith, we center our lives, we entrust our care to the promise of the Good Shepherd—Christ who is with us, always, who guides us, shelters us, lifts us, loves us. A good shepherd who protects our going out and our coming in, and in whose house we dwell forever.

What a powerful healing word for us to hear in these times. Just this past week, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, released an advisory on what he calls “an epidemic of loneliness” that is plaguing Americans, jeopardizing our well-being, health and sense of belonging...our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health.” Exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, the reported rate of loneliness, among young adults, seniors, and everyone in between, has increased each year since 1976.

What can we do? “Our relationships,” Dr. Murthy says, “are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives.”

Interesting that for us Christians, this points to the church, the community, the family of faith, the Body of Christ. We are nourished in fellowship with one another, and we are sent into the world to share that abundance of love with the world.

Notice that through this season of Eastertide, the Risen Christ keeps joining the disciples as they are gathered together. A new community is being formed. The Resurrected Christ appears to individuals, yes. Is perceived and experienced in the hearts of individual disciples, yes. But even more—the Resurrected Christ is in their midst when those first disciples are gathered together—when they’re at the empty tomb, when they’re in that upper room, so frightened. When they’re walking on the road to Emmaus.

Through the power and witness of the Resurrected Christ, a new community is formed, a new people is formed. Christianity is intensely personal, but not individualistic. Christianity is not a “you-and-me, God” sort of thing—whatever, however, where ever. It’s about a new people known by love of which we are a part. As the Apostle Paul put it: “Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it.” Together, we become the new Body of Christ, one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. A new people known by love.

So, now...how do we show forth this great, great love of God to a world so hungry for love, and trust, and peace, and hope, hungry for purpose and meaning, hungry for community, and hungry for some good news that says that tomorrow can be better and brighter than today?

Here, through this community of faith, we do it already in many, many ways—mission, building shelter, working together, walking together, having fun along the way, and finding ourselves changed in the process from the inside out. We've designated May as a Month of Service. You know, we at First UMC work in partnership with a variety of groups and organizations throughout our community and the larger UMC to bring hope and healing where it is needed most. Upward Bound House. The Westside Food Bank. Harvest Home. Habitat for Humanity. The People Concern. UMCOR—the United Methodist Committee on Relief. And others. And for this month, we've highlighted—in the Sentinel, on our app, on our webpage—opportunities to simply show up and jump in. Give a couple hours to sort food, restock shelves, walk in the Homerun for Kids. Bring a neighbor or a friend or your whole family. These can be great opportunities for both service and outreach.

You know—studies show that folks out there may not be looking to join a church per se, but they are eager to make a difference in their community, to have a part in addressing the challenges we face together—housing, food insecurity, aimlessness, hopelessness...People know that there are way too many homeless and hungry folks all around us, and they long to be part of the solution. So, invite someone to simply walk with you, serve alongside you. Let them see that we are a people of love. Let them see what love can do. Let them see the hope which brings new life for all.

The great teacher, theologian, and bishop of the early church, St. Augustine once said: "A Christian should *BE* an alleluia from head to foot!" Isn't that what Easter is really about? It's as transcendent as Alleluias and as basic as offering someone something to eat, a roof over their head, a safe bed, a hand up. Singing. Walking. Serving. Reaching out. Giving back.

So, let's prepare our hearts to share together in the sacrament of Holy Communion that gives us life and binds us one to another in love. And then after worship, grab a donut and a cup of coffee and gather in Simkins Hall to hear about the amazing work of Upward Bound House, serving our friends without homes, changing the world, one family at a time. Let's join together to bind up the brokenness of our community. Let's Be the Hope. Together. In love.

Alleluia! Thanks be to God.

Notes:

Alexandra E. Petri. "Americans face epidemic of loneliness." *LA Times*. May 3, 2023.