

6 EASTER Sermon – May 5, 2024
The Rev. John Sosnowski

As I prepared my thoughts for coming here today as we begin this sabbatical journey of renewal together with Jody, our Rector, the words of today's Collect caught my attention. "O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire." What amazingly hopeful words for the start of a time of discernment and renewal! They are words that remind us about the basics of who we are, what we strive to be, and they affirm God's loving activity among us always. Would that we could believe that God has prepared for us good things that surpass our understanding. Would that we could be so singularly focused on our love for God that we could trust that God will be faithful to his promises and that we will realize things that exceed our expectations, things that will be more than we could ever desire.

As I approached today's readings, I very much had in mind Jody's parting words to us last week about understanding the "why" of what we do in order to be a people who dare to dream and be something of which others would want to be a part. We, church people, can be rather strange. Have you noticed? We hold tight to our traditions; we like our way of doing things; we hang out with people who are like us; we prefer to "go it alone" because we don't like to give up control; and we sure love our buildings – they hold our memories, they are familiar, we celebrate their beauty, it's cozy and comfortable; I know my preferred seat; we like it here!

Along come today's readings from the Acts of the Apostles, a book someone once labeled as "Jesus continued." In the verses preceding today's passage, we have Peter struggling with some surprises God has set up for him. There is an encounter with Cornelius, a centurion, a just and upright man. And there is this peculiar dream with unclean animals descending and an invitation to eat and Peter being rather appalled that something unclean would pass his lips. And God reprimands him and says basically that nothing he created is unclean. With his eyes opened, Peter delivers a sermon beginning with the words: "I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality..." And as he continues, the Holy Spirit comes upon all these Gentiles listening to him, so reminiscent of the way Peter received the Spirit in the upper room, confirming for Peter that in spite of him, God was already working in these non-Jewish people and they, too, are worthy of all that God promises. A stunning realization! God was already working in the hearts of all these "different" people! Peter was simply being called to join with God in what God was already doing and he comes to understand that there is a multiplicity of ways that God is working, even in ways we least expect. There was no way that he could withhold the waters of baptism from these amazing people. The call for us, I think, is clear. We are called to always widen our circles, to welcome the "foreigner," and to learn more about diverse ways of living and loving and expressing our faith, even if it is inconceivable to us. Maybe the "foreigners" for us today are those good people over at the UNCW campus, just a few blocks away! The "foreigners" can also be the people in our neighborhoods – you know, that person that lives two houses down that you never met. I wonder who lives across the street from this church! In the

words of a commentary I was reading: “It might just be time to pay attention to how the Spirit might be planning a blind date for us, to see how God might be trying to entice us into an unexpected encounter that can open our eyes, our minds, and most of all, our hearts.” Easter is a great time to celebrate God’s surprises!

Our gospel today is a powerful invitation to us all, the people who inhabit these buildings and call ourselves Christians, to always remember who we are, our vocation and mission. The words exude intimacy, Jesus’ final words to his disciples at the Last Supper. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” Jesus came to share with us the joy of living in the unbounded love of the Father for him. He knew that as his sole purpose. His identity was to simply give that love away. And then comes the invitation: “Abide in my love.” Abide – pitch your tent with me in love – remain in my love, live in my love. Jesus is calling us to cultivate with him the same intimate relationship he had with the Father. He wants us to stay close to him, to understand him as the source of our life -- So much so, that his hopes, his loves, his desires, his values take root in us and we live them in the world as he lived them. His command flows so naturally from that deep intimacy: “Love one another as I have loved you.” He calls us “friends.” We have been “chosen” by him to “bear fruit, fruit that will last.” A mission, a purpose, a call, our “why” – to abide, to pitch our tent with, to live into that unbounded love of Jesus, that has no limits, that no walls can contain, that is free and for everyone.

You know, when you “pitch your tent” with Jesus, I think you have to be ready to be on the move, to allow Jesus to take you to places that you haven’t thought about. “Pitching your tent” implies that you are on a journey, and so you

hold on loosely to your possessions and come to understand that anything you have is to simply be used in sharing love. “Pitching your tent,” living with Jesus, means you stay open to what he may want, which may be very different than holding on to all that we want, that makes us feel secure and that we have come to treasure over time.

As friends of Jesus, called to love one another as he has loved us, life is an adventure. A reflection in *Christian Century* states: “We end up called to places we’ve never dreamed of living, spending time with people we’ve never wanted to be in the same room with, ...finding our hearts broken and our hope rising nonetheless. We rally for the remotest possibilities: that people will love each other, that community is worth it, that difference is a happy blessing, that every relationship we attempt has value.” We live into God’s dream for us, becoming the beloved community, as our soon to be retiring Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, so often reminds us.

As we begin this sabbatical time, it might be good for us to stay focused on the hugeness of this call, understand more fully our shared mission together to proclaim God’s limitless love, and find ways to live it in our community and our world together. If we did that, all our worries and fears would disappear. For the amazing thing Peter learned is what we can learn – God is already doing what God wants to do. We just need to join God in doing it. Then, as Jesus promises, our joy will be complete. Real joy often eludes us because we are a people on the run, concerned with our self-preservation and self-interests, grasping instead of letting go. Jesus’ challenge is to find *his* joy that comes from being obedient to God, being

emptied, poured out in love, living as the people God intends us to be, going with God this day and always.

Sabbatical time is a time of promise. It is an opportunity to dream and to realize that we can always be more than we are. We just need to look around – to see our world differently – to embrace new opportunities for mission – to allow God to take us to unexpected places, because those places are places where God is already working. I think we are all going to be surprised by what we learn on this sabbatical journey!

And so, let us pray once again our Collect for today: “O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire.”
Amen.