

May 5, 2013

6th Sunday of Easter

John 14:23-29

A few years ago the Papa John's company created a TV ad that stuck out to me. It pictured the company founder behind a slicer sliding it back and forth cutting meat. He says that his advertising agency told him that in order to truly get people's attention you have to get your name in front of them at least seven times. Now he's wearing a T-shirt with the Papa John's logo across the front and the logo comes into and out of view over and over again as he continues slicing. It was silly but cute and pulled off the stunt of appearing authentic.

Sometimes when we read the gospel of John it seems like Jesus' words are endlessly repetitive but I wonder if he isn't following one of those seven times rules. He knows his followers are going to have a hard time getting it so he says it over and over and over again.

In our gospel reading for today we pick up in the middle of a conversation Jesus has with his disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper. Jesus is repeating several core concepts they

will need to remember. They are several core concepts for us to remember too - even as we probably already know them well.

What prompts Jesus' words are a question from one of the disciples, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" And then Jesus replies, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

Several repeated themes show up right there. Overarching it is an assumption that is easily forgotten. Notice that Jesus does not talk about individuals. He talks about a community. He doesn't say, "If you [singular] keep my word my Father will love you and we will make our home in you." No, he says, "*Those who love me* will keep my word and my Father will love *them*, and we will come to *them* and make our home with *them*."

Faith is not an individual action. It is not something that grows and develops by praying by yourself or watching a televangelist preach on TV. Yes, those things can be a part of faith, but faith is a community endeavor. We don't go it alone. Sometimes when I hear parents telling little children that

they'll have Jesus in their heart I imagine a tiny Jesus action figure living in the middle of my chest. And then everybody has a clone of this little Jesus action figure in them. But that's the wrong way to look at it. Christ's presence comes to us both in individual ways and in communal ways. Remember Jesus saying, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there I will be in the midst of them."

Though it is harder to imagine, it is the presence of Christ in and through the community of us that nurtures us far beyond us as individuals.

Of course love also comes up in this reply as love is one of Jesus constant refrains. I preach about the love of God a lot and today let's remind ourselves of a key understanding of this love in the gospel of John. Jesus says the ultimate expression of love is to lay down your life for someone else, as of course he does in the crucifixion. But there is a key thing we have to note here. Such love is not *giving up* one's life for someone else. Someone who is depressed may very well feel like giving up. No, Jesus did not give up his life. He *gave away* his life. He knew his value - and he knew its power too.

Giving it away was then an act of grace. Not a giving up in despair.

When you truly love someone you do not give of yourself in a way that means you are worthless. No, in giving you know you are giving something of value, something of worth, something with power and strength. Truly loving does not destroy the giver. True loving is an act of fulfillment. This is the love Jesus is calling for from his followers. And this is the love God has for us as well. God didn't make you worthless to give up for others. God made you valuable and capable so that you may bring value and capability to others.

And that is the bridge to another theme in the gospel reading - the coming of the Holy Spirit. If the point of God's love is to mature you and give you value and capability then the only way to achieve that is if you grow up. While many of us wish Jesus would be around in a more sensible way - that is, in a way we could sense him more fully - it doesn't happen. Why? John's gospel suggests it's for our own maturity. Look at how a human grows and develops from infancy. At birth the child is totally dependent upon its parents for everything. In time it

grows in capability and independence. That independence and maturity will only come when the person's parents give more space. Ultimately most parents realize they cannot teach their children everything. They can at most instill guiding principles into their children. From there it is up to the child.

So it is with faith. If Jesus had never left we'd never leave home and explore the big world with all its challenges. And if we never explore it we'll never grow up.

That's also why we really need forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't primarily about getting off the hook for being naughty. Forgiveness is about restoration when you take risks and you fail. Forgiveness can give you boldness and courage.

There are two other repeated themes in the gospel reading we want to look at. One is God's peace. Peace, like love, is an often misunderstood idea. When we think of peace we often think of sweetness and tranquility. We think of the absence of conflict. My mind always bring to mind hippies whose ideas of peace and love were far afield from what Jesus actually meant.

Perhaps the best way to understand this peace is to go back to the Noah's ark story. What does God put in the clouds after the flood? A rainbow. And you'll remember that this wasn't just a pretty colorful vision in the sky. The story sees a rainbow as a bow - like a bow and arrow. The rainbow was God hanging up his weapon in the sky for all to see. This was God's promise that there would be no more war between himself and the world. It was a one-way disarmament treaty.

The peace that Jesus talks about is not referring to the end of conflict or perfectly sweet harmony among his followers. That'll never happen on this side of the resurrection. No, this peace is saying to his disciples, "Hey, ultimately I'm for you. Not against you." And that is the same peace we exchange in our worship services. It isn't a promise to always get along. It is a promise of solidarity in this lifetime.

The final repeated theme we want to look at is really a different dimension of something I already mentioned - God's presence. Jesus says that he and the Father will come and, "make our home with them." This home is maybe better understood

as an "abiding place." It isn't just a place of presence. It is a home - a place to abide. And rather than talk about what that means. Let's conclude by singing what that means - for this verse is what inspired our next hymn. (Congregation sings Abide With Me)