

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (B)



6 May 2018

Acts 10:44-48
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17
Psalm 98

Last week I was fortunate enough to spend three days up at Emery House north of Boston with the Brothers of The Society of Saint John the Evangelist. Some of you have familiarity with this extraordinary monastic order, SSJE, and have visited their main monastery house in Cambridge. The brothers are gentle and wise and so kind that it almost breaks one's heart to be in their midst. My time with them was part of a clergy renewal retreat and it certainly was that and more. Two senior monks, Brother Curtis and Brother Geoffrey, tended to our diverse group of weary clergy by inviting us to pray with them, share in their silence, daily chores, and healthy food.

We also gathered together several times for the brothers to remind us, quietly but firmly, of the habits of daily living that keep one grounded in God. Habits that keep one centered in the joy and love embedded in Christian living, in the joy and love that is the essence of being followers of Jesus Christ.

Brother Curtis told a story that illustrates perfectly someone living fully grounded in the joy and love of God. The story goes that several years ago a popular brother was diagnosed with metastasized melanoma, which had been in remission, but came back and was spreading rapidly. Brother Curtis and this fellow brother went out for a run – a run that would certainly be the monk's last. While running they met a friend who apparently had just heard the difficult news and stopped the two brothers, expressed concern and asked how the cancer-ridden monk was doing. According to Curtis his response was this: "Oh thanks, I'm just terrific and feel absolutely wonderful, this is an extraordinary day, beautiful and glorious in every way. Oh yes, my cancer has spread everywhere, but life is beautiful." Curtis and the brother continued their run and the monk died ten days later.

Two foremost characteristics of SSJE brothers are indeed joy and love. It permeates all they do. Their actions and interactions are fully infused with joyful living and love towards those they meet, one another and the God we worship who self-revealed as I AM, not I was or I will be. We all know the past often holds regrets and is a stranger. But as wonderful as the monks are, they don't create this joyful and love-filled way of being themselves, of course. No earthly creature can, we're too locked into our tenuous humanity. But the monks do stay grounded in the message so clearly offered in our Gospel reading today which comes from John and follows exactly where last week's Gospel left off, continuing in Jesus' final discourse: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." *My joy in you, abide in my love.* Two specific, designated gifts from Jesus to us, Joy and Love.

Joy and love, two words that are, at the same time, both over used and intuitively simple and complex. We want to make it harder, sometimes I think we long to make our faith journeys harder, but they're actually not. Jesus outlines in the plainest, clearest terms: "I have said these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.... I love you, abide in my love." In other words, all I have done and taught is so that you may be filled with joy and love – love God and love one another. Love and joy.

Notice, before we move on, that Jesus makes no promises about freedom from hardship or difficulty – as a matter of fact he gives lots of warnings that life will be full of challenges – even following him, sometimes specifically because of following him. But the offering stands, joy and love throughout all of life grounded in God’s will and desire for us.

Now I mentioned that the brothers gently reminded us of some habits (or clues) of daily living that can help keep us grounded in the knowledge of God’s joy and love. I’d like to share some of those practices with you this morning, trusting that they’ll work on you in some way as they have me. Now one warning here – these may sound like simple guidelines but don’t, don’t underestimate any of what I’m about to share.

First, greet each day as a new gift. When you open your eyes in the morning take a few breaths just to marvel at waking up and being alive. And then, then imagine the day as full of opportunities to encounter joy and love. Perhaps challenge also but chiefly joy and love. All of us are given this one day, Sunday, May 6th and what a gift it is to be here together, in this beautiful place on this day. It’s a little miracle in and of itself so greet each day as a precious gift.

Second, and connected to greeting each day as precious, is to live in the present. Time itself is a gift from God and, as such, is most assuredly holy. We are called to be present to who and what is before us, nothing else. We worship a God who self-revealed as I AM, not I was or I will be. We all know the past often holds regrets and the future anxiety. The present is incarnational and we are most likely to encounter God in the now. Likewise love and joy are experienced in the doable present. One doesn’t learn to ride a bike by thinking about riding, or worrying about riding, or watching someone else ride a bike. We all learned to ride a bike by riding a bike. The same is true for most endeavors and so it is for love and joy which cannot be experienced in abstraction but in the active present, by loving and being joyful.

The third and final reminder is to slow down and do less, just allow yourself to do less. This could prove most difficult for many of us but there is much holy wisdom in unhurried deliberate living. If we find we’re constantly rushing then, chances are, we’re trying to do too much. Remember the language of God is silence and quiet can only come from slowing down and walking softly. Gift yourself longer periods of restful and quiet time to be with God and those you love.

And there it is. A little tri-fold, counter intuitively simple gift from God, to Jesus, to the brothers, to me, to you.... Greet each day as a glorious gift, live in the present, slow and quiet down. If any of this feels simplistic or light-weight I would gently challenge you to incorporate these habits for just one week and see how life giving they can be. Jesus said: “I have said these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Amen.



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