

EASTER 6B 2018 (Continuing 1 John Series)

Acts 10: 44-58

Psalm 98

1 John 5: 1-6

John 15: 9-17i

Mighty God,
in whom we know the power of redemption,
you stand among us in the shadows of our time.
As we move through every sorrow and trial of this life,
uphold us with knowledge of the final morning
when, in the glorious presence of your risen Son,
we will share in his resurrection,
redeemed and restored to the fullness of life
and forever freed to be your people. Amen.ⁱ

The Gospel today continues with Jesus' telling his disciples that we are one living organic creation of God, with God rooting us in the fullness of love, goodness, compassion, and truth. God created and grew us as branches, connected to the vine of Jesus and the root of God. As we abide in love with God and with each other, we experience joy—joy that comes from the fullness of love. Jesus us calls us to live into the kind of love that he demonstrates in his relationship with us, as he lived among his disciples and as he lives now in resurrected glory and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the perfection of God, we are all bearing beautiful and tasty grapes, available to be enjoyed by the world. At the same time, in

this fallen world, we know we are sometimes barren, bitter and fruitless. This is a true Gospel illustration of how we Christians are both of God and of the world. The Spirit of Love is the transforming power that moves us toward God and towards more connection with the living and abundant kingdom that is our true home.

The catch is that we must abide in love. We must choose, as we live moment by moment, to reach for the joy, to remain connected to the vine and to bear the fruit of loving relationships with one another. We are not allowed to limit our love and friendship to the people of our own choosing. We are not Christians part of the time. We are Jesus' people. Everywhere and always.

On Memorial Day weekend, we will celebrate Trinity Sunday. The images and ideas that John and 1 John use are deeply rooted in the Trinity. The Living Church wrote about the mystery in these readings: *"We are the children of God by adoption and grace. We are born of the Father, we are grafted into the Son, and we ride upon the wings of the Spirit. In this mystery our joy is full, though always new an ever expanding. We live by the name of Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."*ⁱⁱ

The Letter of First John continues this morning in Chapter 5. Last week, you heard fourteen verses of Chapter 4 and we'll conclude First John next week. John reminds us that perfect love casts out fear. If we are footed in God's love, fully connected as a vine in the branch, we will not be afraid. Yet, all of us fall from that perfect love. We become disconnected and afraid. It is often fear that causes us to fail in our love to one another. We are afraid about money and security and appearances and all sorts of human problems. Our fear makes us treat others harshly. That may be treating our spouses with less than perfect kindness and it certainly includes our fear about people from tribes and nations that are different from us. As we draw closer to God, we **fear less**. Not fully fearless, but much **less fear full**.

We become closer to God by obeying his commandments; loving God and loving our neighbor. First John says in the bulletin insert: **For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments...and they are not burdensome.** The modern translation puts it more bluntly: **The reality test on whether or not we love God's children is this: Do we love God? Do we keep his commands? The proof that**

we love God comes when we keep his commandments and they are not at all troublesome.

I don't know about you, but I often find following God's commandments troublesome. William Barclay commented on this passage that: *(John) certainly does not mean that obedience to God's commandments is easy to achieve. Christian love is no easy matter. It is never an easy thing to love people whom we do not like or people who hurt our feelings or injure us. It is never an easy thing to solve the problem of living together; and when it becomes the problem of living together on the Christian standard of life, it is a task of immense difficulty.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Barclay goes on to give three reasons God's commandments be, "not at all troublesome", even though they seem so in the moment:

1. **God gives us the strength to carry out his commands.** God is by our side and what is impossible for us, becomes possible with God.
2. **For love, not duty is too hard and no task too great.** There are things we would never attempt for a stranger that we would gladly do for someone we love. If we are following God's laws of love,

we will attempt acts of love for the people, known and unknown that God puts in our path or on our heart. Barclay tells the old fable of a boy carrying his smaller brother who appeared to be unable to walk. A stranger asked him, “Do you carry your brother to school every day? Yes, said the boy. That’s a heavy burden for you to carry, said the stranger. He’s no burden, said the boy, he’s my brother. In my younger days, this line became a hit song for The Hollies, Bill Medley and Neil Diamond– **He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.**

3. The third reason is clearly stated in First John itself. **Our faith enables us to conquer the world and all the temptations in it.**

The word in the original Greek text for “world” is *kosmos*, we can conquer the Cosmos with our faith. John defines faith as our belief that Jesus is the Son of God. It is our belief that God loved us so much that he came into our world and became one of us in an act of love that surpasses human understanding. Our faith is our belief that God shares our burdens and cares for us beyond what we could ask or imagine. Our faith is the belief that God is with us now, whatever we face. That God, in Jesus, endured and conquered the worst the world had to offer. Jesus won the victory

over temptation, evil, suffering and death. We can share in that victory now, with Jesus.

Barclay goes into great detail to remind us that Easter brought the great Victory of Christ. Christians die with Christ in their baptism and we live with Christ from that day forward. We can be victorious through Jesus. Not easy to follow God and abide in God, but not impossible. It is what we have promised to do.

As I was writing this sermon, the current issue of The Episcopal Journal arrived. An editorial there was written by Sharon Sheridan, a postulant for the priesthood from the Diocese of Newark who ministers in prisons. Her short column contains a living model of Barclay's theology and analysis and cites the mystery we talked about earlier. She writes from her knowledge of prisons and the criminal justice system: *"We are called to live into a tension and a mystery: to bring criminals to justice, yet to treat them with kindness, respecting, as our baptismal covenant proclaims, the dignity of every human being. We remember the Christ who condemns evil and calls sinners to repent—who also died a criminal's death, forgiving his killers and promising the man crucified beside him a place in heaven. We are commanded to love our neighbors—and our enemies. Often,*

it just feels too hard; but we're not in this alone. We affirm our baptismal promises 'with God's help', knowing God alone can help us achieve them. Our anger, even a desire for revenge, are natural but must be countered with compassion, 'with God's help,' knowing that God's love and tears encompass us all.^{iv}

Each day brings new challenges and opportunities to be God's people and to act in the full power of God's love. To accomplish this, we must allow God's grace and power to enter our lives and CHANGE US. We must allow transformation through Jesus' life in us. It is in our allowing Jesus to abide in us that we bring God into our relationships and allow Jesus' love, strength and power to support us as we bear fruit in our lives. We can make visible the love and power that God has created and continues to use to bring his Kingdom to its fullness for all time. Let us pray that God will pour into us such love that we too will overflow with love, far beyond our understanding and abilities. AMEN.

ⁱ <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=91>

ⁱⁱ May 6, 2018, The Living Church, "Joy to the World". P. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barclay, William. The Letters of John and Jude, Daily Study Bible, p. 103.

^{iv} Episcopal Journal, From the Editor's desk, p. 2