

**Prayer of the Day:** You are Lord of Love and Life. And you give us, O God, relationships in which we know your presence. That's what you call us here to share. Astound us again with love in Jesus Christ greater than our own, beyond limits we know. Strengthen us to fulfill your commandment, your gift, your invitation to break the bread of new creation and drink the cup of resurrection ... with all people, in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

*A New Relationship?*

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

Seth E. Weeldreyer

May 2, 2010 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

I swear I didn't choose this text specially! It is the appointed lectionary for today. What do you think? Do we have a new understanding this week, of what it was like for the disciples to hear from Jesus that the end was coming near? The end of meals and conversations about faith. The end of amazing experiences of grace that stretched horizons of life they thought possible. The end of powerful moments in which they felt personally forgiven or healed. The end of inspiring moments when they helped others. The end of their relationship together in the fullness of Christ's love through which they tasted here and there the rich flavor of God's peace.

Orphaned. Betrayed. Angry. Afraid. Confusion. Sadness. Denial. Do you think we know at least a bit about how it must have felt to hear those words: "I am with you only a little longer." Not unlike other times we face significant change in life.

Now, whatever children of our Center may think occasionally, of course, I am not Jesus! I have no illusion or presumption that my leaving this congregation in a couple of months is equal to Jesus leaving the disciples. I understand, as much as I am able, any sense of betrayal you may feel, disappointment or even anger toward me. Though surely not the same as you, still amid what goodness I envision ahead, I have faced many of those same emotions as I've tried to listen for God's voice and considered the weighty decision. I've found new ways to smile and tear up at the same time. And you should have seen our kids when first they heard the news!

Dear friends, as you've responded to the news this week by phone or e-mail, talking here at church, in hospital or on the street, and as I listen to the Spirit in scripture, I sense there is a way in which we remain together intimately facing this transition ahead. We are not unlike the disciples around the table at the Last Supper trying to understand, denying, grieving the loss of Jesus Christ. You see, I believe *our relationships in Christ's love have been and ever are at least a large part of his real presence in our lives*. Our love ... his real life.

You will look for me, Jesus said, but where I am going you cannot come. Our relationship in Christ will not go as we might want to look for it far down the future's broadening way. So what does that mean? Where do we go from here? Jesus thought the disciples would wonder. Jesus thought we would ask! "I give you a new commandment," he said. Except we know that to love one another isn't really anything new. Jesus even says "just as I've loved you."

Now I'm no theological Einstein here with an  $e=mc^2$  formula. I'm no investment analyst with bars and graphs to illustrate facts or like Warren Buffet to foretell the future. Still my hunch is

that there's some kind of inverse correlation between the joys and beauties and meaningful moments we've shared in God's love, and the painful emotions we feel at times like these. The sweet sorrow of parting somehow reflects all the shared grace in our gathering.

Friends, I think we start to hear God's good news today in this Easter season as we remember that when Jesus goes to the cross it does not minimize anything they shared in all the years before. In fact, the cross is only ever as meaningful as the love and life that shaped them over the miles and emotional terrain of peaks and valleys walked together. And then there is a startling hope, a commanding promise that astounds the disciples as they stare into the empty tomb; and as they recognize Jesus walking beside them, breaking bread with them. The love of Christ never ends. The resurrection is God's great affirmation that Jesus' Way, Truth and Life is the source of goodness and peace through all times and experiences to come.

I have loved you, Jesus says, in order that you will love one another. No this commandment is nothing new in principle. It is new in the sort of community that is formed by it, ever responding to new issues that will always arise. It is a new kind of power and glory for the world – not so much military marching orders as it is an invitation. Not so much a demand for obedience as it is a gift to be received, a plea, a prayer he will soon express that they continue in the way of love and life they have already begun to know in him all the length of their journey, thus far. It is the same kind of love that will define their life after they part.

We know this love is not just sentimental affection, though I feel much of that for you. And there is a time and place for us to share it. It is love greater and broader than any personal intimate connection with God alone, though that's always a foundation for broader relationships of life and faith. It is love acted out every day, in who we are, just as we are. That means imperfect so it takes lots of patience and listening, compassion and forgiveness. It is love that reaches beyond ourselves to others in the world; regardless of perceived limits – much like Peter's struggle to discern God's will for relationship with people outside the Jewish faith.

Let's be clear ... these details Luke tells us about clean and unclean food are really about the way faithful people like Peter thought they judged clean and unclean people. The earliest followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem. They sensed that their attempts to be faithful started to pull them in different directions. Peter tries specifically to explain or justify how the loving relationship that has defined their community has been rightfully, faithfully extended to a Roman Centurion. It is the beginning of the Gentile mission.

The same danger God warned Peter of still threatens every congregation's witness in the world, every person's perspective. Times of change, uncertainty and anxiety heighten that danger to the common good. It is a temptation to say who's in and who's out. It is a struggle between exclusion or inclusion; judgment and remonstrance or grace and reconciliation. Peter saw that God the creator of everything and everyone called good does not intend to exclude anyone from sharing the community of life and peace. This revelation revolutionized the identity and the understanding of the earliest Christians. It gave birth to the church itself, as we have come to know it, out of those who to that point were faithful Jews following the way of Jesus. *It gives us the vision of how to live into the future as Christ did in the past. We describe it as a loving, joyful fellowship for the worship of the God, creating sanctuary for all.*

Jesus' command and Peter's inclination is simple enough to understand. Lord knows it's far more difficult to practice in daily life. We lose our focus, distracted by other devotions or insecurities. It gets complicated by our conflicts and differing perspectives over genuine attempts to be faithful, to discern how to build up God's goodness in our world.

Dear friends, the truth is I don't know much from experience about how to do this parting. I feel lots of uncertainty like other transitions all of us have made. All I know is to love as Christ has inspired us to do; and to trust that somehow it will work out. There will be new life for all of us in our way. Inasmuch as ours has been an imperfect human love, it will be important for us to share forgiveness as much as possible ... so that we can let go of whatever hurts still clutter our hearts and make room to hope for new life; so that we can preserve what of goodness we have shared and be free to create relationships anew.

You have been gracious and supportive and affirming – this week and throughout times past. As I've said numerous times in recent days, any goodness that has grown over the past twelve years we have created in God's grace together. It is our collective efforts and gifts that have made any of it and all of it possible. At least, that's what I hear Jesus tell the disciples. After this night of the new commandment and a few days following, best we can tell, they were rarely ever all together again. God forged new relationships by a power of love beyond their own. *And that is precisely the way the church has grown and Christ has been known so powerfully over the centuries.* That is the longing, the experience of faith expressed in one hymn I've come to love: "O Master, let me walk with Thee, in lowly paths of service free ..."

Maybe not unlike the disciples in Jesus' final days we have a journey to travel yet together. And it will be as important for us – for me, at least – to walk this journey together as has been everything else we have shared. We may have moments in the garden when tears fall. We may have moments of trial, confusion, disbelief when our faithfulness may falter. We may have moments when Jesus the Christ will plead for forgiveness to reign. *And as we walk this journey together, just remember it is not Holy Week. It is Easter!* We are people of the resurrection! We know what is on the other side of the tomb! So when a Pilate may ask what is truth? We will answer with the love we have given and received. When crowds gather to wonder and stare, we will tell stories of life we have shared. When we walk together toward the end, we will remember the greatest and simplest promise given to us in Jesus Christ – God is always with us. When we go to the tomb we will trust it will be empty and we will await full of hope Jesus coming to walk beside us and eat with us again.

The disciples sat around the table that night when it became much clearer to them. We sit around this table today and Jesus gives us a new commandment; a new relationship to share, an invitation to receive and to pass on to someone else the eternal source of new life. Open our hearts to taste the rich flavor of God's grace. Then go with some clear winning word of love. Go to live in hope that sends a shining ray, far down the future's broadening way. Go in peace that only God can give.

Thanks be to God. Amen.