

Easter VI 2018 Year B
Acts 10:44-48
1 John 5:1-6
Psalm 98
John 15:9-17
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At one time I assumed that our gospel lessons during this season after Easter would focus on appearances of the resurrected Jesus. At least until the celebration of the Ascension of Jesus coming up this Thursday, May 10. Then follows 10 days of waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, May 20. What has shocked me during this Easter season is that our lessons have instead been rife with the work of the Holy Spirit all along. Since Easter Sunday, when Jesus met the disciples in that upper room and breathed on them the Holy Spirit, that Spirit has been active.

The lesson from the Book of Acts concludes the story of Peter addressing the Roman Centurion Cornelius at his home. While Peter is still speaking to Cornelius, the Spirit descended, actually fell on the listeners. Nothing was required of them. They didn't have to make a commitment, there was no study, no conversion, no waiting for baptism. The Spirit just fell on the listeners. Accordingly, Peter took the next step and baptized them, though they had already received the Spirit. The Spirit cannot be confined whether to a select group such as the chosen people of God, or a certain priestly order, or faithful Jews living under the law, or zealots or any other circumscribed group. Like the wind, the Spirit is free and continually active and today's story witnessed that Spirit falling even on Gentiles. This was perhaps the last thing that Peter expected. Yet, the Spirit is always moving toward and including those who we might consider on the margins. Or even outside the purview of God's love and concern.

Our gospel lesson isn't from one of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Rather from Jesus' farewell discourse on the night just prior to his arrest and crucifixion. In that final discourse, Jesus said the most amazing thing to his followers, "you did not choose me, but I chose you."

Each Sunday as we gather for worship, we read and reflect upon the bible's message. We hear the lesson and then we ask ourselves the question, "What might

God be speaking through this text to us today?” What is it that Jesus is saying to this congregation, and to us at this time in our lives, and more specifically what is Jesus saying not just to the whole community but to you and to me?

I don't know about you, but I like to feel in control. I make plans and prepare for the future. We are fortunate to live in a culture where we have so much control. So many options. So many points of decision. So many things we get to decide about. This cultural privilege can lead us to the delusion of thinking that we are in control of our lives.

But today, Jesus makes clear that we aren't in control. We didn't do the choosing. Instead we have been chosen. And the impact of our having been chosen means Jesus has hopes for us, expectations of us. Oh, dear.

Your presence here is demonstrative of your having been chosen. This isn't like winning the lottery, there are many winners. Jesus is always reaching out through the Spirit and drawing people in. We aren't here by accident. Jesus is calling all of us, choosing all of us, and the mission of God in your neck of the woods depends on you.

As much as we might wish life were different, we are not in control. Peter certainly wasn't in control either. As he shared the story the Spirit simply fell on Cornelius and the family. Peter had to catch up. He had to think on the fly. Let's see, these listeners are experiencing the Holy Spirit, what's left? Oh yes, Baptism. Even though they were Gentiles, they had received the Holy Spirit, God was at work. God in the Spirit is always ahead of us.

Today, you see, our being here confirms that Jesus has chosen us. We simply have been chosen. And thankfully we have responded. In the face of many other possible activities that we might be engaged in at this time, we have gathered here in worship.

Transition: So having been chosen, how are we to respond? In some church circles coming to know how we are to respond to God is referred to as discernment. I have just come back from an Episcopal Church conference. I work with clergy as they focus on discernment. I work as a member of a seven member team and our work assists the participants as they focus on questions that guide decision making and discernment. Who am I? Where am I going? Who is God calling me to be?

This work can seem fairly esoteric and perhaps limited to folks who have the time, intellect and desire for such pursuits. Some might feel this is the sort of work that only clergy would engage in.

If we ever think about discernment, we may believe discernment relates to momentous decisions of the once in a lifetime variety. Is this relationship with this particular person, the one that God has in mind for us to spend our lives together? Or it can seem like these questions only apply to concerns around vocation as we make the big decisions of life. What vocation or profession am I feeling God calling me towards? Business, teaching, medicine, law, parenting, marriage?

Questions of discernment were being addressed at the conference that I was serving as a faculty member on this past week. Earlier in my work, our conferences were for clergy alone. Sometimes the clergy who came were looking at longer term decisions around call. They were engaged in the work of discernment. Were they to stay in their present position? Or were they feeling called to consider a new call elsewhere? If so, where might that be? Sometimes those are the questions but not at this conference.

This conference was different. These weren't clergy coming alone. After years on faculty and working only with clergy, the target group has changed. This conference was for clergy couples who have served the church for a significant length of time. This then wasn't work done by clergy in isolation, but rather in community. The participants were clergy couples. With that in mind, some of the work was done by the couple. But we also formed even more community by placing the participants into table groups of four couples per table.

As they arrived the faculty team observed them. Some seemed excited and enthusiastic while others seemed worn out and tired. Some barely made eye contact, thankful to have arrived, but not ecstatic to be there for sure.

A breakthrough for me and perhaps for them as well occurred during one of the daily reflections. We were reflecting upon the question, "Who is God calling me to be?" The reflector then helped us understand this question in a completely new context. He said that this is not a question to be asked only when doing what we might call long term planning. Rather this was a question that we should ask ourselves as we begin each day.

What is God calling us to do, today? The answer may be found in the gospel lesson. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another.” To love one another. Not in the abstract. Not in some grand or overarching way. Jesus is calling us to love not just our family and friends. But rather Jesus is calling us to love all those whom we encounter each and every day.

The love that Jesus is commanding us is not a feeling. But rather the love that Jesus is speaking of is an action on our part directed towards the other. Action and engagement on our part directed for the well being of others. Each person we encounter during the day comes with God’s hope for us in that encounter. Will we open ourselves to the possibility of engagement or will we turn aside, too preoccupied? In the big decisions and in the little interactions of life as well, each interaction can be a moment of connection. A chance to love as Christ has loved us.

The author, Alice Walker, has a gift for eloquently capturing meaning. She writes what I believe Jesus has in mind, “Our last five minutes on earth are running out. We can spend those minutes in meanness, exclusivity, and self-righteous disparagement of those who are different from us, or we can spend them consciously embracing every glowing soul who wanders within our reach - those who, without our caring, would find the vibrant, exhilarating path of life just another sad and forsaken road.”

So it seems the choice is ours. Ours to make each and every day in connection with each person we encounter.

Over the course of my time at this week’s conference, the change in the participant couples was noticeable. Especially for those who seemed to be most in need on arrival. As the conference proceeded and the table groups connected, the participants seemed to come alive. They seemed to blossom and glow. Some who had arrived head down, were looking up. Smiling, engaged. The connection created during the conference changed their outlook. No longer did they seem to be walking the “sad and forsaken road.”

So, today, “who is God calling you to be?” Carpe diem, seize the day. Jesus has chosen you. And in turn you are to share the love of Christ. Loving those whom God brings your way, willing and working for their good fortune. Helping them to experience the “vibrant, exhilarating path of life.”