**Preaching Notes for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C (May 1, 2016)**

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**[John 14:23-29](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=138" \l "gospel_reading)**

This is Jesus’ final evening with his disciples. On this occasion, Jesus has already tried to show what God’s love is like to his closest followers. He washed their feet and told them to wash one another’s feet. He shared a meal with them. (Unlike the other Gospel writers, the author of John did not provide a description of the meal other than to say that they were at a table and dipping bread into wine, and that it was night.) He told them that he would not be with them for very much longer, but he was leaving them a new commandment: that they were to love one another and that if they obeyed this commandment, even after he has left the world and the world could no longer see him, his disciples would still be able to see him. He had conversations with Peter and Philip.

So after all of this teaching and conversation, a follower named Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asks Jesus to explain what he is talking about. How will he reveal himself to them, but not to the rest of the world? Jesus’ answer to this question is today’s reading: “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” (John 14:23, NRSV).

The commandment that Jesus asks his followers to keep is to love one another the way that he loved his disciples. Jesus promises that when we do this, we will continue to see him revealed in this world.

So to continue to have God in Christ revealed to us, all we have to do is love one another the way Jesus loved his disciples. But how do we do that? What does it mean to love one another the way Jesus loved his disciples?

During his life on earth, Jesus continually looked for ways to give himself in love to just about everyone he met. He loved the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the sick and diseased, the mentally ill, the deformed, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the unclean. Jesus loved the minorities, the women and children, the homeless, the unemployed, the immigrants, and the powerless. He gave himself in love to all of these by teaching them, healing them, and just plain old hanging around with them.

In the end, he gave himself in love in the ultimate way, in the giving of his life for others. Then, even after he gave his life, he came back to his disciples and gave them a spirit of peace. And later he gave not only the disciples, but all of those gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the power of the Holy Spirit and sent everyone who believed in him forth to give his love to others in his name.

Now, of course, none of us is Jesus, and none of us can give ourselves to the people of this world in the same way that Jesus gave himself. But we can try, and trying changes us because the more we try, the more we learn to love by concentrating on giving rather than receiving. And the more we learn this love of God, the more at peace we are with ourselves.

Recently, I had the opportunity to reconnect with a person I have been blessed to know who truly exhibits a Christ-like spirit of giving in love to others. Bob changed the course of my life. He is a man of great financial means; but if you met him, you would never know it. Why? Because he has completely given himself over to the way of Jesus Christ and his love. He has cultivated a giving spirit in all that he does; and this has made him gentle, humble, unpretentious, and completely at peace with himself. Through the choices he has made with the enormous gifts God has given him, he enabled not only me, but a whole host of other people to be able to fulfill dreams and live out God’s call on their lives in ways that would not have been possible if not for his incredible generosity.

Certainly, if God has blessed us with wealth, then being extremely generous with our financial resources might be a way for some of us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And it is important if God has blessed us with this gift that we not keep it only for ourselves, but use it to enable others to live out their ministries and respond to God’s call in their lives. I hope we we would do this not only with hearts at peace, but with humility and gentleness, and never as a means of drawing attention to ourselves or gaining some advantage or expecting something in return.

But generosity with financial or material resources are not the only gifts that count in this life. God has blessed every human being with gifts and resources to be shared with the world. Our job as proclaimers of the gospel and followers of Jesus Christ is to help one another identify those gifts and encourage generosity of spirit in every disciple.

I think of so many others besides Bob who have given of themselves in love to me in such life-changing and profound ways that there really are not words adequate to convey what their love has meant to me. There are so many. I write often about the incredible Methodist family I was blessed to be born into, but there are so many others who have made God in Christ real and present in my life. There were pastors who encouraged me and challenged me as I answered God’s call into the ministry. There were the patients I saw in CPE who gave me so much more than I could have ever given to them. There were the members of my congregations over the years who taught me how to live in community and who loved my children as much as they loved me. There are friends who love me without condition, and whose companionship in this journey of life is priceless. There is my husband, who is one of the most giving people I have ever known.

I am certain that I have received so much more than I have given in this life, but I strive to follow my Lord in the way of giving, trusting, and opening myself to the world around me. Loving God’s world and all that is in it has brought me more joy and more peace than anything else could have in this life, and I am grateful beyond words that Jesus called me to follow him and showed me how to find everlasting life.

The best news of all in this passage is the promise from Jesus that when we are trying to learn to love one another the way that Jesus loved his disciples, we never have to do it alone. When we give ourselves in love to this world, God helps us. The spirit of Christ strengthens us and lifts us up. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to do things that we would never have been able to do on our own.

**[Acts 16:9-15](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=138" \l "hebrew_reading)**

**Key Word: Loyalty**

Since this passage is about Lydia, one of the earliest female Christian leaders whose story we have on record, we will reflect upon the history of women in the church as we consider the vow:

“Will you be loyal to Christ through the United Methodist Church and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?”

One of my favorite books on the role of women in the early church is Bonnie Thurston’s [***Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary***](http://www.amazon.com/Women-New-Testament-Questions-Commentary/dp/1592445586) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998). As we consider the story of Lydia, I will once look to Thurston’s work as the primary source informing my notes on this text.

This story marks the beginning of Paul’s ministry on the European continent, as he makes his way across the peninsula into Macedonia and into Eastern Europe. As a colony of Rome, Philippi is a place of special rights and privileges. One of those special rights and privileges is that women are allowed to participate in the culture with more freedom than in places previously visited by Paul. In this instance, women seem to have special rights and privileges in the synagogue. Thurston states that the word translated as “place of prayer” (verse 13) is a word that, when used in other places in Scripture usually refers to synagogues. Since the synagogue was usually the initial point of contact for a visiting minister, it makes sense that Paul would have gone there first. Presuming Thurston is correct about all of this, then it would appear that in this synagogue in Philippi, women were allowed to gather for prayer without men present. And in fact, when Paul and his colleagues were invited to sit and speak with them, they were invited to sit in the rabbinic position for the purpose of teaching this group of women who had gathered for worship in this synagogue. Among these women was a woman by the name of Lydia.

Lydia was obviously a person of importance in the community. She was a professional woman, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God, that is, a Gentile woman who had accepted Jewish teaching, but who was not technically Jewish by ancestry, but who had become conversant in the Jewish faith. And finally, she was the head of her own household, which would have been very unusual in this place and time. She was also clearly a risk-taker, in that she invited Paul to come to her home without concern for what effects it might have on her reputation or her business.

The story goes that after hearing what Paul had to teach, her heart was opened to receive Christ, and she and her entire household were baptized. So this means that Paul’s very first missionary church on European soil was started by women. This is pretty amazing to think about. As Thurston puts it, “Paul’s first European congregation is made up of women. In Gentile Macedonia there were apparently not ten Jewish men to make up a synagogue congregation, but faithful women met to worship nonetheless, were receptive to Paul’s preaching, and, according to Acts, became the first European converts. Lydia’s home became the meeting place for these new Christians (verses 15 and 40). One wonders of Paul’s letter to the Philippians was addressed to her home. In that letter, as we saw, there was little hint of limitation on women in the Christian community” (Thurston, 124).

The fact is, there were women among Jesus’ first disciples. There were women who traveled with him and heard him teach alongside the men for three years. All four gospels report that women were the first ones to discover the empty tomb. Some of the earliest Christian communities were supported by, housed, and led by women. It was only after Christians started being threatened for their radical behavior, which included allowing women to teach and lead, that the early church began to greatly limit the activities and roles of women in the church.

I remember when I was in seminary, I had a really close female friend, and we always talked about how one day we were going to write a book together about what we learned about Jesus as little girls in the church from all those years of standing at the women’s feet in the church kitchen as they worked together to prepare for a potluck, serve at the coffee hour, or plan and host a spaghetti dinner.

Women will tell you that in spite of the church’s oppression of them for more than two millennia, they are the ones who really run the church. They are the ones who volunteer and who support the church and work to strengthen its ministries. They keep things organized and get things done and, at the same time, challenge the church when needed! Women have been doing this in every church, from every denomination, for all of the generations that Christianity has existed. Women have been loyal to the church of Jesus Christ, even as the church has not always been inclusive of valuing and using their gifts in return. Women have been “loyal to Christ through the United Methodist Church” because their faith is grounded in the grace they have come to know in Jesus Christ.

What have you learned about Jesus from the women in your church? Is there a story you can tell about a female saint who shared her faith with you in such a way that it changed your life, or opened your eyes to greater and deeper faith? I have told many stories about the women who shaped my faith over the years that I have been writing preaching helps. Last year for Mother’s Day, I wrote about my own mother. But there are many other women I could write about, because the truth is, even though most of the women I have known in the church were not preachers, they did more to teach me about Jesus than most of the preachers I have listened to over the years.

As we celebrate the contribution of women to the church of Jesus Christ through the Festival of the Christian Home and Mother’s Day next Sunday, let us lift up the mothers in the faith who have so graciously taught us by their words and by their example what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

**[Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=138" \l "epistle_reading)**

I love this vision from Revelation: a holy city from which perpetual light shines, lush flowers, fruits, and vegetables spring forth, and through which the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and the lamb. In this city, there is no need for a Temple because God lives here, dwelling in the midst of God’s people. The people can gaze directly upon the face of God and see God’s name written on their foreheads.

In this passage, John’s vision is not cast as a place separate from earth. It is not a vision of heaven. Rather, it is a vision of the city of Jerusalem that John sees from the vantage point of the high mountain. This amazing vision is of a place within this world, not a place apart from this world, or a place where we go after our earthly life is over.

* In this vision, the holy city is described as a place where there is plenty for everyone. Is there plenty for everyone in the community where you live?
* In this vision, there is plenty of fruits and vegetables for all. What kinds of food do the poor eat where you live?
* In this vision, the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations. What stands in the way of the healing of the nations in our world today?
* As we consider John’s vision of the heavenly kingdom of God dwelling upon this earth, how can we as followers of Jesus Christ participate in ushering in this kind of place?