**Preaching Notes for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C (April 24)**

**Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser**

**[John 13:31-35](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137" \l "gospel_reading)**

This scene from the Gospel of John occurred near the end of Jesus' life. During this period, he was busy telling them that he would shortly be leaving them and that he fully expected them to continue living in the way he had taught them. In fact, he more than expected it. He *commanded* that rather than give up on the world and all its problems, they must keep right on trying to redeem the world by loving one another and by living out that love that had been shown them through the son God had sent into the world that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:6). "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," he said.

Jesus never said, "I am leaving because I give up on this rotten world, so you might as well just give up on it too."

Instead, in the very next chapter, he says, ""I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live . . .I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:18-26, NRSV).

Not only John, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well, make it perfectly clear that Jesus fully expected his disciples not to give up, but to continue the mission of spreading the good news, and that they continue living out the way of love that he had taught them as long as they lived on earth.

So what about us? I know that there are those who believe that this world is past the point of redemption. Maybe it is. But that is not for you and me to decide. God is the one who began life, and God is the one who will close the book in God's own time. In the meantime, we who have turned our eyes upon Jesus and decided to follow him have been given a commandment to carry on in love.

Whenever people who were suffering or in need came to Jesus, Jesus never said, "It is too late. You are not worth saving." Always, Jesus healed them. All they had to do was want to be healed and believe that God wants the world to be healed. If the whole world will not be healed, God still wants whoever will to respond to God's love and find life instead of death.

You and I, who look to Jesus, must allow ourselves to be the instruments of God's grace. Jesus demands that we do more than simply see that our names are placed in that book of life. Jesus commanded that we do more than just be saved ourselves. Jesus commanded that we not surrender as long as we live on earth. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are to love even our enemies. We have a holy mission.

This earth we live in may be corrupt and filled with the poisons that people pour on it. But it also contains the very goodness with which God created it. It is the only life we know.

Let us work with God on the side of the goodness that God created, rather than write off the world and wait for the end and let the devil take what follows. To love is what Jesus clearly asked us to do. Soon enough, the end will come. Let us not wish for it, but be a working part of the new heaven that Jesus had brought already down upon this earth. After all, we are not yet part of the dead, but, by the grace of God, part of the living.

**[Acts 11:1-18](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137" \l "hebrew_reading)**

**(OR Week 2 in the Easter Series. Please see page 4 in** [**“Easter Series 2016: A Focus on Our Baptismal Vows and the Book of Acts”**](http://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worship-lectionary-planning-helps-c/Study-Guide_EasterSeries-on-Acts-YearC2016.pdf) **)**

**Key Word: *Resist***

Recently, I had a conversation with my colleague and friend Melanie Gordon about the role of prayer in the life of a Christian. She was reflecting on a conversation with some other Christians about whether or not there was a reason to pray for others if a person didn’t believe that praying would change the course of history or change God’s actions in the world. I have struggled with that question many times over the years myself, as have other people of faith. But I was reminded during the conversation that whether or not I personally think prayer can have an effect on what God does or does not do in this world doesn’t change my need to pray.

I know that prayer is something I must do, and so I pray. Prayer isn’t about changing God or changing circumstances or even, as some have suggested, changing myself. It is about necessity. The truth is, none of us knows exactly how prayer works. We only know that when we practice an active prayer life, prayer becomes as crucial to us as the air we breathe.

It is interesting to me that in his explanation of the role of intercessory prayer for baptized followers of Jesus Christ, Dr. Mark Stamm connects our prayers as a community of faith directly to doing the work of resistance.

This week, we consider the meaning of our second baptismal vow:

“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

Resistance. Resist. Is it possible that prayer can actually help us resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Stamm says that when we think about resisting evil, many of us think of troops battling Nazi Germany or envision thousands of New York City firefighters and police officers marching bravely into the World Trade Center Towers on 9/11. We tend to think of resistance by action, or even by force.

But Stamm suggests that if we think of resisting evil only in terms of force, we have failed to hear the fullness of the gospel message. The work of the baptized disciple of Jesus Christ is about resistance when we hold ourselves accountable to pray for others in a spirit of reconciliation and peace. We resist evil, injustice, and oppression whenever we gather around the Table of the Lord and participate in the kingdom of heaven. We resist when we respond to God’s word by offering ourselves and our gifts in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ’s offering for us, when we choose to love our neighbors as ourselves—especially when we practice loving our enemies.

* What are some concrete examples you can think of where your church needs to stand in resistance to evil, injustice, and oppression?
* What form might that resistance take? How has the church expressed resistance in the past?
* What can we learn from Mark Stamm’s suggestion that we take some of our cues from the liturgical practices of the church? How might intercessory prayer, passing the peace, and sharing in Holy Communion provide avenues of resistance to the evils, injustices, and oppressions we face in our own community?

In our world today we can be awfully quick to not just determine, but name out loud who our enemies are. We might think our enemies are those who hold different religious beliefs from ours, or different political views, or even different interpretations of the Bible. We might think our enemies are those who live in a way that is different from the way we think people ought to live. We might consider someone an enemy because he or she has done something that hurt us or hurt someone we love. We might decide a person is an enemy because he or she looks different from us, or because our family history has taught us that “those people” are our sworn enemies.

The message from today’s story about Peter’s encounter with the Gentile Centurion named Cornelius is that the power of the Holy Spirit can open the hearts of anyone to know the saving love of Jesus Christ—even those whom we have determined to be, if not our enemies, at least “not one of us.”

What we must do is move away from taking a stance that others must prove to **us**, by their words or actions, that they are now “one of us.” The work of determining who is part of God’s kingdom is never ours to do. It is always God’s decision, and not one of us knows what the mind of God is or how God will separate the wheat from the chaff, or even that God will actually one day do that.

It is hard to refrain from deciding for ourselves who should be in and who should be out, who is a Christian and who is not, who is a friend and who is an enemy. As human beings, we seem built to make such judgments, no matter how hard we try not to. Perhaps it is simply part of our sinful natures. I don’t know. I only know that I must confess that I do it too, and that I must take active, intentional steps to resist my natural inclination to judge for myself who is righteous and who is not.

Living as baptized disciples calls us to actively resist not just through our words and actions, but through our ritual prayers. Praying together for the world, and especially for those whom we would rather not pray, is an act of resistance. Sadly, in a lot of congregations, this kind of prayer does not often take place. Instead, we tend to share mostly only in the joys and concerns of our own community and circle of friends, and not spend as much time praying against the overwhelming forces of injustice, evil, and oppression that pervade our world.

* As you consider the story of Cornelius’ response to the message of God’s grace shown in Jesus Christ, can you not imagine that God can take even the most hardened heart of your most fervently sworn enemy and soften and mold it into fertile soil for a disciple’s heart to grow?
* Can you imagine conversion might be happening even when you see no evidence of it?

**[Revelation 21:1-6](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137" \l "epistle_reading)**

Erik M. Heen has written one of the most helpful theological analyses that I have seen on this text in Year C, Volume 2 of [*Feasting on the Word*](https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9780664231019/feasting-on-the-word-year-c-volume-2-lent-through-eastertide)*.* In his short and thorough treatment, he makes a very strong case for reading this passage in the context of the earthly realm that has been the focus of this series from the beginning. Heen puts it this way:

 “[A]s the vision of the new creation continues to unfold in Revelation, the distinction between heaven and earth simply falls away. Heaven quite literally descends to earth, radically renewing it (21:2). In the process, all life on earth is restored to God's intent for it. One might legitimately ask, then, what role the saints have in this process” ([*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary,* *Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertid*e](https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9780664231019/feasting-on-the-word-year-c-volume-2-lent-through-eastertide)).

Indeed! What role DO the saints in our congregations have in this process of restoring God’s intent for this earth? And more specifically, with regard to this passage, what do the worship and liturgy of the church have to do with restoring God’s intent for this earth?

Perhaps that discussion can be framed by the fact that this is not a passage we usually hear preached from the pulpit on the fifth Sunday in Eastertide. Rather, we most often hear this passage read as one of the texts for the Service of Death and Resurrection. In that context, we hear these words proclaimed as part of the Resurrection hope that our now deceased loved one has gone on to abide with God in this “new heaven and new earth,” the “new Jerusalem” where “God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

But if we read this text in the way Heen suggests, what might it mean for the way we are living? If we believe “the home of God is *among mortals*. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them” (Verse 3, emphasis mine), how might our view of this world and our responsibility for caring for it be transformed?

What might God have to say to us about the decisions we are making that negatively affect the health of God’s creation -- our planet and all of the things God made to dwell upon it? Certainly, we can dismiss those scientists who warn us that global warming is real and that if we don’t change our ways we endanger our future as hacks who can’t prove anything. But if we are honest, we don’t need scientists to tell us that we should be doing all we can to care for God’s creation and to ensure the health of all forms of life on earth (and beyond earth in heaven above), because God already called us to be good stewards.

What might God have to say about the violence that pervades so much of human interaction, from families and local communities to global acts of war and terrorism? Certainly, we might argue that we are no more violent than any other generation, but is that really an excuse? If God’s home is here with us, should we not try harder to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially those neighbors who are hardest to love?

What might God have to say about all of the social, political, economic, and ecological injustices that we allow to persist? If we are God’s people, the ones with whom God wants to be in community, what are we doing if we fail to live up to the responsibilities God has placed not just on our hearts, but in our hands?

Oh that our generation, and especially those of us who interpret and preach God’s word in it, may be counted among the saints who weren’t afraid to speak up and advocate for radical, all-life-supporting measures that protect and nurture this world that God has so graciously created and entrusted to our care. Let us not take this responsibility lightly. Let us instead rise to the occasion and be trustworthy and true ourselves.