

Sermon Easter VI Year A 2017

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:7-18

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

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You might say that today is graduation Sunday. Our Christian formation programs draw to a close today. I am very thankful for everyone who offered their time and ability to teach our children, youth and adults this year. We had a very talented group of individuals who offered themselves generously for our benefit as teachers. You see we are all learners and we always need people who make the commitment to teach. By that we mean being willing to explore their faith with others.

Our younger members move through grades as they grow and develop. But this growth and development is not limited to the young. The rest of us continue to grow and develop too. We are growing in faith over the course of our lives. Neuroplasticity. While we may not attend Sunday formation offerings, we can still enrich our Christian understanding through conversation and relationship, through reading, Bible study, worship, prayer, meditation or not. The choice is ours. God's love never forces a response on our part. God's hope as Jesus expressed it is that "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." We understand the commandments to be summed up in the Great Commandment, to love God and love our neighbor.

During the Easter season, we pause our readings from the OT and instead focus on the stories from the Book of Acts detailing the work of evangelism as the Christian faith developed. This morning's lesson has Paul in Athens, the cultural and intellectual center of Greek life. Paul is skillfully weaving together Hellenistic philosophy and poetry in addressing a group of non-believers. Making them aware that this unknown god that they worship is none other than the God whose

overflowing love has made the world in which they live. Paul is making faith credible to outsiders as he invites his listeners to share in this indwelling life with God through Christ.

Paul drew upon the words of the sixth century B.C. poet, Epimenides that have been incorporated into our BCP. Our Collect for Guidance in the MP service begins, “Heavenly Father, in whom we live and move and have our being.” Paul goes on to speak of the creative force of God whose actions are on broad display around them. This God is accessible to all if they would but search for God, for he “is not far from each one of us.”

This is the sixth Sunday of the Easter Season. The calendar this year links our final day of CF, our Graduation Sunday, with the Feast of the Ascension, as we heard in the reading from John’s gospel. Jesus is preparing the disciples in his farewell discourse for the time after he has left them. We hear the story today because we are preparing for the Feast of the Ascension this coming Thursday, 40 days after Easter. Jesus says he will not leave his disciples bereft or orphaned but will send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. “He abides with you, and he will be in you.” Jesus went on to say, “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. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” That is a powerful promise. This language sounds very similar to what Paul said to the Athenians, and to what Peter had to say as well. Each lesson seeks to make the point that our lives are inseparably connected to the divine life of God whose Spirit is with us always.

If this is graduation Sunday, then our graduation speaker is Peter who exhorts us to “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.”

Now times have changed. We are much less demanding in this regard as a culture. No one demands an accounting of the faith of others, so we needn’t worry about Peter’s admonition to do so with gentleness and reverence. Perhaps we would be better prepared if we thought that this was a serious possibility, of someone actually demanding an accounting for the faith and hope that is in us.

Alas, we have relegated our faith story to the most private part of our lives. We would never ask another, and probably just as surely we would not venture to share our faith, perhaps because we fear that we are not fully formed and not ready to share. But I suspect this means we are missing many an opportunity.

As we live in fearful times, perhaps we should realize that people around us might desire an accounting from us. To do that, we have to develop a sense of what we believe and can say in response. To give an account of the hope that is in us.

If, as I suggested, we are graduating this morning, what have we learned? Has formation and worship this year aided our ability to respond, to give an account of the hope that is in us? What do we hold to be true?

I believe that God's love cares deeply and empowers us to care, to share, to heal and to lift up. Our world needs to hear this loud and clear. What do we hold to be God's hope for the world? Do we share that hope, that love? Or do we hold back because we fear that we don't have all the answers. That there are parts of the Creeds that we aren't sure of. Or that the Ascension suggests events that we can't fully accept perhaps. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but rather the rich soil for faith to develop, grow and thrive.

God's hope is that in this place we call St. John's we have experienced something of God's love and concern and that we will share this experience with others. Each of us is a key part of this process. We do this by sharing a word of encouragement. Or perhaps through a meal, a card, a call or text.

Early Thursday morning, we received a call from a young man who said, "My mother died unexpectedly last night. She was married at St. John's. Will you help my family with her funeral?" Of course we will and that is just what you are doing. Offering flowers, a reception, being acolytes and readers, doing everything it takes to support a family at such a critical time. You are extending your arms of love to them.

Maybe you have shared Christ's love as you taught classes this year for people of any age, whether children, youth or adults. Maybe just through getting to know the children who sit around you and through the experience of watching

them grow and develop. Maybe you shared your faith through Children's Chapel, or assisting with the Children's Choir and watching them develop competencies and abilities as they grow and change. As you watched them grow into the person that God hopes they will become.

Or maybe you are sharing your faith as you agreed to serve as a sponsor on a mission trip this summer. Maybe you shared your faith when you supported the Mission Possible VI party and auction. Or when you participated in Elizabeth Edmunds' bake sale for her mission trip to the Diocese of Leeds in England. Or the meal you prepared and ate with the men of the Gateway. Or the vegetables you planted, nurtured and harvested from Lynchburg Grows. Or the flowers you took from LG to someone who was sick or shut in. The more I think about it the opportunities to share the hope that is in us are not as rare as I first thought.

Knowing how much God loves us and has forgiven us. Sharing that with others. Helping them to know this loving presence that we have come to know in our lives. And if we haven't come to know God's presence then being open to new experiences, learnings, and opportunities. God "in whom we live, and move, and have our being," is always wooing us, drawing us.

And if you haven't come to experience that then I pray that you will continue to open yourselves. Not being negative and downcast. But open and available. Trying to discern this presence, this hope that is in you.

I pray you come to know the richness of our lives and the love that God has provided. The beauty of creation. The gift of life. The opportunities that we have.

This Sunday, we finish with formal formation activities and I hope we feel empowered to face the weeks ahead, prepared to give an account of the hope that is in us. The next step is to invite others to this opportunity. To look for opportunities to extend an invitation. To the Pentecost picnic two weeks from today. To Vacation Bible School in July. To the blessing of backpacks in August. To the parish picnic in September. Or to the grief support group in Advent, or to the luncheon on the first Thursday of the month at WC. God's desire is that we will share this hope that is in us. Widely, broadly, at every opportunity.

Invite, welcome and connect. God's Spirit is with us each and every day. Oswald Chambers once wrote, "We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do."

With God's grace and Spirit ever with us, our task is to extend our hands in love to the world around us. To love God and to love our neighbor.