

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B
The Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Episcopal Church at Yale
May 9, 2021

Abiding

Acts 10: 44-48; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17

Mary Adelia McLeod was the first woman consecrated a diocesan bishop in the Anglican Communion, and it was a great honor to get to know her as my bishop when I entered the ordination process in Vermont. When she retired, she told the story, as a young mom, of her husband suddenly dying, leaving her with five young children. She was barely managing getting through each day, when she met a young man who first became a friend, and eventually began asking her out on dates. Mostly, she either couldn't go, or had to cancel because of some last-minute crisis. *"This is impossible,"* she kept thinking, *"surely he'll either lose interest, or just run away,"* so she found herself holding back from letting herself care too much. One night, in a torrential downpour, he showed up for a date with an impressive handful of flowers. She opened the door, he stepped into the chaos that was her life, and instantly realized any date that night was doomed. So instead, he handed her the bouquet, and said simply. *"I'd like to abide with you and the kids, Mary. Will you let me?"* Mary Adelia took the leap of faith, and she and Mac have been married now for over 50 years.

The excerpt we heard tonight from John's gospel was Mac's inspiration in that moment. It's part of what some scholars refer to as Jesus' Final Discourse, or what some seminarians call The Incredibly Long Goodbye – five chapters long to be precise.

It begins at the Last Supper, and is filled with some of the most intimate and vulnerable words Jesus ever speaks. Listen to John: *"Jesus knew that*

his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” “Little children,” Jesus says, “I am with you only a little longer... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this all should know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And then, as we just heard Kyle read, Jesus continues, *“Abide in me as I abide in you... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment,”* Jesus says again, *“...that you love one another as I have loved you...”*

I worry sometimes that we’ve heard these calm, soothing words about love so often that they’ve lost their bite, their ability to challenge, maybe even terrify. Yet, looking at its course in our own lives, love is *anything but* calm and soothing. Consenting to love, as Mac and Mary Adelia did that night, or as Jesus’ friends did on the road to Calvary, means discovering that if love is to be real, it will always carry a real cost.

That’s because real love, as contrasted with romantic love, is not a feeling, but a choice. By its very nature, it’s sacrificial. It guarantees that our precious independence will be constantly interrupted by the needs of others; that we’ll be hurt and disappointed; swept into the chaos of each other’s lives, and experience that dizzying descent into losing control, into the helplessness of not being able to fix what hurts someone we love. Whether it’s a romantic partner, a sick grandparent, or a close friend

thinking about hurting themselves, we learn, over and over, that choosing to love can carry a high cost.

But that's just the beginning. Listen more carefully to Jesus' "love command:" *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you..."* And how did Jesus love us? To the death. And who did Jesus love? *"If you love those who love you,"* Jesus asks in Luke's gospel, *"...what credit is that to you? ... No,"* Jesus says, *"...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."*

You might ask, Why should we bother with love if it's so risky, and so hard? Jesus' answer is clear, *"...so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*

Here at ECY, these are not just words, but hard – earned, lived experience. That's why, for me, the last seven years have been the richest, most rewarding, most joy-filled ones of my ministry. I've laughed more, worked more, learned more, and allowed myself to love more, than ever before as a priest.

What have I learned from watching our ragtag community practice Jesus' love command? As I listened to Peter's proclamation of radical welcome to the despised Gentiles in today's reading from Acts, I was reminded how, because you've come to recognize the seed of divinity in each of us, because you've experienced Christ abiding within you, you consistently open your arms in extravagant welcome to everyone who tries out our community, and you invite friends and suitemates to join you here as well.

I've watched you design and lead worship, community dinners, spiritual autobiographies, retreats, Game Nights, hikes, and apple picking, always adding love as the first ingredient. I've seen you bake and share cookies to spark conversation with neighbors who face housing and food insecurity, and witnessed your mutual delight as you discover common ground. In all of this, I've seen you openly, lovingly acknowledge what blessings you are to each other, as you point out what a relief it is to have a place at Yale to actually be able to share those affirmations.

As you've dared to dive into hard conversations about undoing systemic racism, homophobia or misogyny; about how the church needs to change to embrace young adults; about how to practice self-respecting and healthy relationships; about ways to reject the idols of appearance and affluence and achievement – I've seen how much you learn from each other, the common ground you discover, and how much you've let yourself be changed by simply listening to each other with loving attention.

And finally, as you laugh at my foibles, and at your own, I've seen you finally “get” how beloved you are, that you are enough, and that you can fail and learn from failure, without lingering too long in that wilderness of shame and self-loathing. In learning how to change yourselves, I've watched you embrace your responsibility to change the world.

So the only counsel I can offer you, as I leave this beloved community, is to keep on loving. If you can't love God a lot, love God a little bit; if you can't love someone you really can't stand, try loving them a little bit. Take the first steps down the path that involves choosing a little “Yes,” if that's all you've got in you right now. By the time you're invited to consider larger “Yes's,” I promise you'll have been given what you need to continue the

journey. Be food for each other, and when your spirit is hungry, remind each other that the essence of faith is knowing that our God never forgets the recipe for the manna we need.

Martha Postelthwaite puts it beautifully in her poem, *Do Not try to Save the Whole World*,

*Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose, she writes,*

*Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is yours alone to sing
falls into your open cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world so worthy of rescue.”*

As you go into your reflection rooms for the next few minutes. I encourage you to consider where you're creating a clearing in the dense forest of your life, and waiting patiently for the song that only you can sing.