

April 24, 2016
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
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The 4th Gospel, the one we call the Gospel of John, is an interesting document. It was written somewhere between 90-115, 60 to 85 years after the death of Jesus.

New Testament scholars tell us that at least 4 different people or traditions contributed to the document we have. There was also an editor who took these 4 strands of fabric and wove them into the form we have now. It is not clear whether the editor was one of the four contributors, or if the editor was a 5th influence in compiling the current gospel.

At times the document we have is clear and beautifully written: the Samaritan woman at the well; Jesus' late-night conversation with Nicodemus.

In other places the document reads like Jesus had a bit too much wine. Or maybe the editor had a bit too much wine. The reading for today is one of those sections that starts out like a word salad which is hard to follow.

Eventually, we find a few of the themes we hear quite often from Jesus, along with a couple of reminders that are unique to this farewell discourse as Jesus' time with the disciples comes to an end.

First, he tells them that if they really love him they will live out the things he has taught. If they don't live as he has taught, it is safe to assume that their love for him is not a high priority.

Then he makes the interesting statement about the Holy Spirit: the Advocate, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit will be with them. The job of the Holy Spirit is to teach them, and to remind them of the things Jesus has said. Like you and I, the disciples needed to be reminded about the teachings of Jesus. We need to be reminded because these teachings are foreign to our culture: things like love and respect all people; things like be generous and not greedy; things like pay attention to what's really important: justice, equality, and peace. Things like don't build your life around how much you can acquire and stash away.

Someone has said that we work long hours to acquire things we don't really need in order to impress people we don't really like. Jesus urges the disciples to avoid that trap: to be folks who understand the more important things in life.

Then, Jesus goes on to say what some of those important things are: PEACE. He offers the disciples inner peace, a contentment with who they are and what they have or don't have. The apostle Paul later referred to this peace as the peace that passes all understanding.

Jesus reminds the disciples that such peace comes to those who place their trust in God, who are not driven by fear. Jesus was not naïve: he knew about the struggles of life. This is not simplistic advice to “don’t worry, be happy.” This is encouragement to let go of our sense of urgency, to let go of our need to control, to let go of our fears of one another, to let go of resentment and distrust.

He tells them this type of trust is unique: “I do not give you the kind of peace the world is chasing, to no avail. I give you the kind of peace that leads to a deeper life.”

You have heard me complain about TV preachers and the so-called Gospel of prosperity. Believe it or not, I try to keep these public complaints to a minimum. But I can’t help but wonder how much it grieves God to hear religious teachings that are all about how to get more money, how to have a softer and more affluent life -- without any word about serving others, without any word about justice and caring for those who are helpless.

So often Jesus said the exact opposite of the prosperity ideas: don’t pile up riches, don’t think you are better than those who are poor, don’t chase things that are unimportant, don’t neglect those things that are essential.

So, as we approach the end of the Easter season we find Jesus approaching the end of his time with the disciples. He has few opportunities left to teach them and encourage them. He knows what a counter-cultural message he has for them. He has been teaching them for quite some time, and they haven’t been good students.

There is both urgency and hope in his voice: urgency that he is about to go and they don’t seem ready to carry on without him. Hope, however, that the Holy Spirit will help with their remedial work: hope that the spirit will help them learn about the inner life, about the deeper life, about the life of service to others.

We still struggle with the very same issues: we reach for security that doesn’t hold. We fear things that cannot hurt us. We distrust others and wonder why they distrust us.

God offers us the gift of Easter: a new life, a resurrection life centered in those values Jesus taught: loving God, loving our neighbors, loving ourselves. A life of generosity rather than greed, a life of freedom rather than fear, a life in which God sustains us in our struggles, not an easy life without struggles.

If you want a life of self-absorption, greed, fear, and comfort on easy street, send your money to the guys on TV. It’s a gamble, and most people leave the casino disappointed.

If you want a life of love, justice, generosity, courage, freedom, and help with the struggles of life, Jesus invites you to follow him. And he promises us the Holy Spirit to help us, to remind us of these deeper values, to help sustain us all the days of our lives. Amen.

Tom E. King