

May 5, 2024 6th Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

Grace and peace beloved ones of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Take a breath.

A big, deep breath. And let it go.

And again, a breath, and let it go.

A few weeks back when my peer group met, I was feeling tangled.

The bishop's election was coming up.

I was nominated.

I was doing all the things one needs to do: writing, and making a video, engaging at the forums, praying.

I was sharing with you the process, the steps,

doing my best to be non-anxious in an incredibly anxious time. Amen!

I sat at peer group with such a tangled mix of feelings.

Somehow THIS Sunday came up in conversation, May 5th.

You know the Minneapolis Area Synod assembly was May 2-4, Thursday to Saturday.

The next day would be May 5th, that's today.

And Maria and I had slotted me in for preaching, consciously aware that it would be right after the election.

We thought it might feel right if I could preach,

and we knew it just might be too much.

What if I'd been elected bishop?

What if I hadn't been elected bishop?

I remember commenting that the gospel and scripture passages seemed to fit well, very well, no matter.

At peer group, my colleagues, my friends, got into this big debate...

Oh no, you should definitely not preach on May 5th, not right after the assembly,

speaking maybe, but not preach.

Oh yes, that makes all the sense in the world, of course you'd want to preach, need to preach,

to share what has happened—regardless—

to find the gospel word for us today, this day, May 5th.

Even this week, Maria and I went back and forth too, not debating,

but wondering about energy and words and tears, what you'd need, what I'd need, what she'd need. You'll notice the bulletin just says Sermon, no name, for we weren't exactly positive what we'd do, nice to keep a little flexibility in the system, right?

Now it's May 5th and I'm standing before you.

Grateful to be looking at you lovelies,

With our tender hearts and our teary eyes.

Finally on this side of the assembly,

living into the bittersweet reality that I was elected bishop
and the Spirit, she was moving, moving powerfully.

The Holy Spirit's presence, palpable presence: that was strong in the assembly.

And it's strong here today: that's such a comfort.

There is no where I'd rather be than listening for the Holy Spirit's invitation with you.

We'll give it a shot. Amen?

All our passages have much to share.

Our reading from the Book of Acts is the tail end of a pivotal, church changing story,
a second Pentecost!

Pentecost Sunday this year falls on May 19th and we'll hear about the Holy Spirit's arrival in the community
with tongues of fire and many languages.

Orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, today's story goes another step and widens the circle of community further:

With trust Cornelius and his Gentile household welcome Peter.

With trust Peter realizes that yes, even Gentiles can be baptized,

coming to the community not by way of Jewish practices

—that's what Peter had always preached,

but by the Spirit: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing?" I love that line!

If that sounds familiar, there is crossover galore between this story

and the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch we read last week.

By the Holy Spirit, God's love, is for everyone, no partiality.

When we're tempted to draw neat lines of who is worthy and who is welcome,

read again the story of Peter and Cornelius. And do the next right thing.

I love the praise in today's Psalm.

O sing to the Lord a new song—I can sing praise even with tears.

1st John. What shall we say? Love. Keep the commandment to Love.

And that takes us into our gospel for this morning picking up where last Sunday's gospel left off:

I am the vine, you are the branches, Jesus told them.

They'd already reclined at supper.

He'd already washed their feet (this Maundy Thursday).

Jesus is nearing the cross and he knows it.

Those must have been anxious and scary times for Jesus' community.

In the unknowns, on the verge, this long extended conversation keeps trailing in on itself,
winding deeper: I am the vine, you are the branches.

And then it circles in again: Abide in my love.

So that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.

And then again: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend.

And again: You didn't choose me, but I chose you.

Love one another.

Imagine those little tendrils, wrapping and circling, winding around and around:

Let me say it again, Jesus says, and one more time.

Abide in my love.

This is where you belong.

This is what my love looks like.

All those chapters before, all those stories of ministry, all the healing, all the miracles,
all through the long farewell, Jesus has been coaching them.

Practice this love, abide in this love.

Remember how I am the vine, how you are the branches, practice it.

Remember your roots, remember the fruit, practice it.

In the middle of today's gospel, Jesus reminds those disciples,

"No longer do I call you servants, but now I call you friends."

The power shifts and it's in this abiding, mutual love that we get to do our best to serve and be served,
to forgive and be forgiven,
to love and to be loved.

Oh, it can get messy.

So much needs mending in our lives, in our world.

And it's gracious, and we try, we try, because Jesus calls us to abide and to practice.

Abide in my love, Jesus says.

You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Abide always in my love.

A few thoughts for today, with all it holds:

Back in the spring of 2015, you faithful folks here at University Lutheran Church of Hope
called me to be your lead pastor.

Your welcome was big and warm.

The Spirit was moving.

BUT in order to say yes to your call,

I'd need to say goodbye to the congregation

I'd served for a dozen years prior, a congregation I loved deeply.

Somewhere in the midst of that, I had a giant ah-ha.

When the Holy Spirit called me and cared for me,

that very same Holy Spirit was also caring for that congregation I was leaving,

The same Holy Spirit would provide for them, and comfort them, lead **them** into the next steps.

My struggle through THIS whole process was that I love you, that I love this community.

That saying yes to potentially becoming bishop, meant saying good bye to you.

I'm still not keen on saying good bye, but am never the less comforted

that the very same Holy Spirit that was so present in the assembly,

that buoyed me and gave me words and slowed my heart,

will be with you, with our congregation through these next months and years.

Jesus has a powerful, gorgeous way of reminding his humans, that his love is mutual.

In this time for our congregation, let us lean into mutual love, shared love,

trusting our congregations faithful and capable leaders...who have a lot on their plates.

Mutual love will take us a long way, both in how we interact together,

and how we trust our way into God's future.

I commented before that this congregation has been through bishop's elections and the transitions.

By my count, this is the 4th time one of us has been elected.

As a community you have some muscle memory of this experience.

That said, I know sometimes it hasn't gone well,

so maybe you have some muscle trauma, and it's good to be aware of the triggers.

We'll lean into mutual love and trust.

So many emotions...

As the votes kept going I could look across our table to Linda Herman and Mary Perez,

to Karen Jorstad and Dan Bielenberg and Diane Greve,

to Pastor Maria's teary eyes, knowing that we were trusting this mutual abiding love.

Bittersweet feels right to me.

Excitement, hope, sadness, grief, maybe some anger—that's okay, jealousy as one of you put it,

trust, overwhelm.

For me it's a mix of excitement and grief.

You have welcomed our family with such grace and patience.

Alice doesn't remember the church I served before Hope—this is hard!

You have welcomed my leadership and our shared leadership.

Grief seems like a most natural and honest emotion for all of us, and that is just fine.

God can hold it, and the Spirit will do her thing.

We'll get into the details in the weeks to come, but I'd expect that June 9th will be our last Sunday.

Bishop Ann's last day is at the end of July, and the bishop elect begins August 1,

but there are things in the meantime

and my family needs some extended weeks to rest and transition.

Over these coming weeks, we—we all—might be tempted to focus inward.

Some of that is necessary, needed, healthy.

AND our call to be God's abiding love in the world—beyond these walls, beyond this community—

in voice and body and mind and spirit,

is so clear, so necessary, so needed, so healthy.

Beloved ones, take a breath. A big, deep breath. And let it go.

Abide in my love, Jesus says. You did not choose me, but I chose you.

We, dear ones, are God's abiding love in the world. Abide always in this love. Amen.