

Fifth Sunday in Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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One of the most misunderstood books of the Bible is the final book. Some call the book “Revelations,” but its actual title is Revelation (singular). Many think it predicts the future; however, its imagery speaks more broadly about struggles among evil. And, most preachers simply ignore it, choosing the easier route with the Gospels. Yet, today’s reading from Revelation is deeply intertwined with our Gospel reading, and it’s too good to skip.

You see, today’s reading from Revelation puts us near the end of the book. Up to this point, we’ve heard that Revelation is a message to seven churches, but, in a larger sense, to all churches. We heard of trumpets, signs, bowls, and candles – seven of each. The final two chapters of the book talk about the marriage of heaven and earth. In this chapter, and much to the chagrin of popular spirituality, we learn that people don’t go to heaven, there is no rapture, there is no punishment, and there are no “end times” (whatever that is). Instead, we hear the voice of God declare that all the stuff of heaven and earth will be replaced. There, something new is formed – it’s a new earth *and* a new heaven. But the real kicker of it all is that instead of us doing the traveling to some other-worldly place, God is the one who makes the trip. It is God who comes down to make this new place among us... right now.

And this new place, this new way of being together, this new heaven and new earth are what Jesus proclaims in today’s gospel. A new world where heaven and earth came together happened that night before Jesus’s arrest when he gathered for a meal. But

before that meal, he took a washbasin and a towel, kneeled at the feet of his friends, and washed each person's feet. And, after that meal, Jesus gives his followers a new commandment – a very familiar commandment to us, but, in reality, it's something new. For, it was commonplace then, as it is now, to easily love your in-group while excluding the out-group. That is, it was easy to value and celebrate those who are similar to you while treating difference as a liability. It's easy to love someone of the same socio-economic status; it's easy to love someone of the same political party; it's easy to love someone of the same belief system, culture, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and country of origin. But, here, Jesus is describing a love that goes beyond boundaries and barriers. It's a love beyond familiarity and comfort. It's a love for all people – hard stop. Period. End of sentence.

So, let's level with each other for a moment. Generally, we want to think that we are good people. You know, I doubt anyone kicked a puppy for fun on the way to worship today, right? But we've got a huge problem in our world that is at epidemic proportions. Instead of following the loving example of Jesus that reminds us that moral responsibility is collective, we go individualistic with our faith and our love. After all, in John's gospel, Jesus showed what love looks like when he generously provided wine when the wedding's supply was dry (John 2); Jesus showed us what love looks like when he took on a servant's role to clean dirty feet (John 13); and Jesus showed us what love looks like when he gave of himself to the end (John 18). Through it all, Jesus's love was corporate, collective, and communal. So, when we believe that we can privatize moral responsibility we're delusional. And, when we only advocate for ourselves and respond when it impacts us, then we are not loving like Jesus. And, that is the very thing we confessed today before Lauren's baptism. Together, collectively, we confessed the things that we knowingly do and unknowingly do that break down God's love communally. Because, to follow Christ is

beyond individualism, to follow Christ is one giant, frustrating, annoying, and massively rewarding group project. For, in John, to love is completely and utterly a communal activity.

This last week, I had the opportunity to gather with over 1,500 preachers for a conference on preaching. During our time together, we got word about Pastor Betty, an ELCA leader serving a congregation in Racine, Wisconsin and living in Chicago. Last Wednesday, Pastor Betty was driving her five-year-old daughter to school when she was stopped by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents (ICE for short) who admitted they were specifically looking for her. After arresting her, ICE drove to her home and forced their way into her house with their guns drawn. Inside, they took her husband and cousin before leaving with the door unlocked, which led to their home being looted. Pastor Betty noted that she was not allowed to change out of her pajamas, and she said that ICE agents were “jubilant” because they had managed to arrest so many people in a single raid. Pastor Betty, her husband, and daughter have been living in the U.S. since 2004. In that time, she received a Master of Divinity from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago in 2013 and began her studies to get a Ph.D. She originally fled Colombia after guerrillas had violently attacked the school that she managed where they assaulted several teachers. However, because she did not have an official police report, the U.S. denied her asylum case in 2008, and she will soon be deported.¹

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/betty-rendon-elca-ice-detained_n_5cdc82d6e4b0b4728ba28374?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHcFNjeBgp-pUiLA4LtfqbacBPi_rGK5HIV1ZhWKL9Iss-iWxKXNc95SnPd6KxLpz7m3gXo9IlsDt8OIWfSP5eLF2Z7nZDqmWGxwcJg4aCZj3a3Cb-lGmLdJxrAqnotiHxgA0gMhBlr_FRMRQ8JaspkotANbeFsEl_9ClpnMwJ1t

Friends, we've got a mess on our hands. Government officials rejoice in tearing apart families. Lawmakers care more about clustered cells in a woman's uterus² than a living, breathing child torn apart from a stable home. Friends, our church is damaged, torn, and being broken apart. Collectively, we've made this mess, not our God. Together, *we* elected our leaders. And the only way we can get out of the messes that we've made for ourselves is to come together as a community and enact God's vision for a new heaven and a new earth.

And that is where John's gospel comes into play. For, in John's gospel we find that our faith is one that abides. You see, in John, over and over again, Jesus invites us to abide in God's love. That is, to remain, continue, or dwell in God's love. Or, to be steeped in a boundless love. While our human love is pretty selfish, God's love is selfless. While human love is fairly individualistic, our God's love is communal. While human love is reserved for the in-group, our God's love is for all, without exception.

That, my friends, is why it's hard to have a Christian faith alone. Even the things that feel personal, like prayer and meditation, are gifts to move us to respond in love to others. For when we pray, we are reminded of a God who acts and moves. We are reminded that we have a God that calls into being a new heaven and a new earth where we encounter God in this time and this place. So too, we are invited to abide in God's good love. We're invited to dwell in a love that shows no distinction and no preference. We're encouraged to remember the love that God has first shown us. It's a love that requires no proof of citizenship. It's a love that celebrates difference rather than tolerates. It's a love that requires no application or judicial hearing. It's a love

²http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/AbortionSS.pdf?_ga=2.14596592.615097700.1558122992-2093282875.1558122992

that looks at you with all your imperfections, all your sorrow, all your torment, and all your hopes, and says: “let’s be here, together.”

In the sure and certain hope of glimpsing God’s new heaven and new earth here and now, you’re given some opportunities to respond to God’s love today. In your bulletin, you’ll note some ways to encourage your elected official to bring about God’s vision on earth where all are treated with dignity, respect, and love. We’re offering the ability for you to give us your contact information and we’ll submit the sample script on the back page on your behalf. Alternatively, there is paper and envelopes to submit the letter yourself. If you leave the letters with us we’ll apply postage. Letters and contact information can be given to the offering plate or in the baskets in the fellowship hall. So too, in our brokenness, we can also share a glimmer of love with those caught in the current system. In your bulletin, you’ll also find a small card that you can write to Pastor Betty and place in the offering plate or baskets in the fellowship hall. We’re going to mail these cards to Pastor Betty in the detention center so can she remember that community can bring restoration, so she knows we are praying for her, and so she knows that God is present.

So, friends there it is. That’s the good news for today. We have a God who has begun a radical reformation to bring a new heaven and a new earth to this place. A God who has given us a glimpse of boundless love in Jesus. A God who invites us to reflect that love to all without border, barrier, or boundary just as we have already been loved. What a gift. Amen.