

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B, Easter 6
May 5, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I would guess that the boy was somewhere between the ages of eight and twelve when I met him. At that time in my life, I couldn't place any child's age at all, and perhaps that didn't matter, as he was quietly sobbing that morning when his concerned counselor brought him to me following the morning camp gathering.

I couldn't quite understand what the child said to me between hiccups and sobs, but once we seated him in a rocking chair on the porch of the Dining Hall next to my rocking chair, the important thing was to just rock, and trust something intelligible would perhaps emerge in time.

And it did.

"They're singing it wrong," he finally said.

"They're singing what wrong?" I asked.

"The song," he replied. "They aren't singing the right words. I know the song, but they aren't doing it right. It's not the way they did it at my last camp."

That was the first of several similar conversations I would have with sobbing children that summer. A series of local Episcopal camps had closed, and their dioceses and churches and families had brought their children to the Barbara C Harris Camp, the next-nearest Episcopal camp in the region. And like good Episcopalians, they expected the experience to be largely the same: largely congruous with the experiences—many of them deep, potent, and transformative—that they had had in their own beloved camps; camps which were no longer extant.

It was not the theology which would set them off, nor the change in venue—it was that the hand movements to songs were slightly different; that we didn't know a favorite game that they had played regularly; that our outdoor chapel was too sunny, or too far away, or too full of rocks, too outdoorsy, too something, making the distance between the place they knew, and the place they

now inhabited under the same overarching title, even more prominent. It was just familiar enough that it was even more jarring when something seemed awry.

Their grief, which was good and holy and absolutely age appropriate, was coupled with a deep desire to keep the things which felt safe, intact. We Episcopalians tend to lean towards the status quo in most respects. We like things the way we know they have been, and trust that they will continue in the same way. My Catholic baptism gets in the way of self-identifying as a cradle Episcopalian, but I will tell you that at the ripe old age of 18, I was enough of an Episcopalian to lament loudly and at length, the addition of- brace yourselves- lamps to the choir stalls in my home parish, which I discovered my first visit back home from college. But it was fine the way it was, I kept saying, having never actually needed to read sheet music in that particular spot. The possibility of grief at now being a visitor in a place I had once called home, was being manifested very interestingly—mostly through misplaced nostalgia.

Consider the arc which the disciples have been traveling this whole Easter season: three whirlwind years following an itinerant preacher and teacher; Jesus' goodbye to them on Maundy Thursday, and the washing of their feet; his trial, crucifixion and death on Good Friday; the Resurrection and subsequent appearance of the risen and yet fully enfleshed Lord on Easter Sunday; his continued teaching and accompaniment following the resurrection. One might suggest that the disciples had just gotten through a tough spot when Jesus had died, but he's back again and it's 'just like it was before'.

But we know that isn't true, because there is that small trinitarian phrasing we use in our worship so often we sometimes forget the third part of it: Jesus was crucified, died and buried; Jesus rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven.

Forty days after Easter, Jesus will leave the disciples again, and this time, for good.

In just a few days, we observe the Ascension of Jesus—his departure into heaven prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And the church will change yet again—those disciples who had disbelieved that the risen Christ was real had come to some acceptance about it, perhaps even comfort. It had been hard for those few days in Jerusalem, but now that Jesus was risen, they could all go back to how things used to be.

But we know death and resurrection don't work like that.

Our readings for today are those we need to hear before things change again for us, for Jesus' disciples. In the Book of Acts, Peter, visited by Cornelius the Centurion, a gentile, experiences the Holy Spirit descending not only upon the Jews, but on the Gentiles as well. The mystery of God has once again unfolded in a second iteration of the Pentecost, wherein the breadth of God's grace turned out to be wider, more generous, than even Peter could have imagined. In the Gospel, you might recall some of these phrases are familiar— "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Maundy "mandatum" Thursday, 'commandment Thursday' is echoed here again—before Jesus leaves us one more time, he tells the disciples what they need to hear the most: those words of love, not only for the disciples, but of love which they are instructed to share expansively in the wake of his departure.

And it is in both of these truths that the church, that we, find ourselves operating: God's vision is more encompassing and expansive than we can ask or imagine, so our smaller versions of God's body will necessarily have to change and shift, and die and resurrect. AND that the core of everything we do—everything that we are asked to believe—to live into, to try on, to persist in—can be summed up in Jesus' words to us, reminding us that we are now the love-bearers in this world, indeed, that we are commanded to love one another as we have been loved first by God.

You might remember that was Peter who refused to have Jesus wash his feet on that Maundy Thursday. Because Peter believed that a God should not wash feet. No Lord, he said, you will never wash my feet. And yet it is Peter who is granted the vision of a church beyond his wildest imaginings, beyond his scope and spectrum, changing a small following of those who knew and loved Jesus into a community who would never again look quite like that small scared huddled group in that upper room on Easter evening. Love will overcome fear every time. Not easily. Not quickly. But every time.

And within a body of Christ which changes every single time a new person walks into this sanctuary, it is too easy to be fearful. It is too easy to cling to the physical body of Christ and forget that what endures has nothing to do with the body, but everything to do with the love which finds its strength in its very dispersal; in giving it away, it increases and becomes sustaining.

Years later, I would find myself back at the Barbara C Harris Camp, again as a camp chaplain. Older, but not much wiser, I assumed that it would be just as it was nearly a decade earlier. Imagine my surprise when the hand gestures had changed to some of the gathering songs; the lyrics and tunes were just a bit different, so that I noticed how clearly I was singing the wrong words. Some of my favorite games and events were no longer central, or even part of our daily

practice. And yet the rocking chairs on the porch of the Dining Hall were still there, inviting me to sit and offer to God all the grief about the body of Christ which had changed, and gratitude for the body of Christ resurrected in that place.

God's body will continue to change, church. It will die, and resurrect, and ascend. But the body is nothing without the love of Christ, made manifest in the body of Christ—in you. In us. Every time.

Amen.