

Sermon – John 15:9-17; Acts 10:44-48  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
6 Easter – Year B  
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“The Joy of Being Chosen”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

1. To be a homeowner is to bear witness to the second law of thermodynamics. Or perhaps, to own a home is to study modern Irish poetry. Either way, the lesson is the same. Physics reminds us of the entropy we know in our bones: Disorder always increases. Or, as William Butler Yeats put it, “Things fall apart.” We need neither physics nor poetry, however, to know that this is true. We need only look around ourselves, at the places we live, whether we own them or not. Perhaps it’s because we’ve spent more time at home, but this pandemic year has been hard on our house. We have, in recent months, replaced an air conditioner unit that reached the end of its utility; replaced a bathroom sink, wall, and pipes that had rusted through; and, most recently, had our roof torn off and replaced. Don’t get me wrong: Not only do we love our home, having made many wonderful memories there over the past six years; we are also aware of how blessed we are to own a home and to be able to afford these repairs. No complaints here, just the simple observation that no matter how much we love the places we live, disorder always increases. Things fall apart. We abide the places we abide. We put up with the places we live. What else can we do? Where else can we go?
2. Today, we find ourselves once more in the Upper Room with Jesus, a room that was probably in need of repair, on the Thursday night before his death.

Here, in the midst of this world's entropic decline, Jesus casts a vision of a new world, a new place in which we can abide. This new place, this Kingdom, is a place and a people of friendship and joy. It is not a Kingdom of which we are worthy in and of ourselves; neither would we, in our sin and shortsightedness, choose it for ourselves. Although things fall apart, we tend to prefer things as they are. Nevertheless, we hear again today that we are chosen for this Kingdom of love and that it is love itself that creates the Kingdom. A love that is greater than all others. A love that gives itself away on the cross. For you. And for me. Jesus enters into decline and decay, all the way down to death; this is the depth and breadth of the love of God, this God who desires to abide with us.

3. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus has spoken these words before. They were at the core of his self-identification as the Good Shepherd. They land with greater impact here, perhaps, because now we see that his death is immanent, just around the corner. Jesus was never speaking theoretically. His words always pointed to his own death. But now, here, under the shadow of the cross, we see and hear the lengths to which Jesus is willing to go to build a new abiding place, a resurrected world of grace. In this moment, for our sake, Jesus shows that God will no longer abide sin and death.
4. I was recently reading an old sermon by Bishop Timothy Smith, and was reminded of the story of Sullivan Ballou, a story with which I first became familiar through Ken Burns's documentary, *The Civil War*. Major Ballou had enlisted in the Union Army shortly after the war began, and found himself moved from his native Rhode Island to the outskirts of Washington, D.C. On July 14, 1861, he wrote to his wife, Sarah: "Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eyes when I shall be no more. Sarah, my love for you is deathless. God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grown up to

honorable manhood around us. If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.” Sullivan Ballou was killed a week later in the First Battle of Bull Run.

5. Words have more power when they are spoken shortly before death. Had Major Ballou survived the war, his letter to his dear Sarah would likely be of little interest. The fact that he gave his life in devotion to cause and country gives these “few lines” weight and power. Jesus’ words in John 15 are all the more powerful, too, for being spoken so soon before the death he knew was coming. We use words like love and friendship lightly, but upon the lips of the soon-to-be crucified Christ, we hear them in a new way. *This* is what friendship is; *this* is what love looks like. And this, finally, is what creates a new home in which we can abide, a world whose falling-apartness has been put back together through the death and resurrection of Jesus, given as gift for you. Jesus lays down his life and takes it up again, undoing this world’s sin and violence to create something new. He goes to the cross not whispering our names, perhaps, but holding each one of us in love. He does this for us, for you.
  
6. We are called now by this Christ, commanded even, to live with such love and friendship as lodestars for our lives. Following the risen Christ into the world, we discover the surprising ways in which the Holy Spirit is putting things back together by putting people back together. This begins within each one of us, as we are moved from death to life, sins forgiven, in the waters of Baptism. But it occurs between us, too, as the Holy Spirit transgresses boundaries that once seemed solid. Look no further than Acts 10, of which we hear only a thin slice this morning. Luke writes of the baptism of Cornelius and his household, and nothing could be more surprising. Here, God not only declares that the gift of the gospel is for Gentiles, too, but that it is for those who were most to be feared and avoided.

Cornelius was not simply a Gentile; he was a Roman centurion. He was devout, but he was nevertheless an agent of Roman oppression. But there, in Caesarea by the sea, a city that served as a symbol of Roman power and might, right in the enemy's backyard, the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and his household. They are claimed for the Kingdom, given a new place to abide. How, Peter asks, can they withhold the waters of baptism now? How can they not follow where the Spirit leads?

7. Where is the Holy Spirit leading us in these days? What longstanding boundaries need to be crossed? Who has been left out that should not have been excluded? Who is Christ choosing? As the people of God, we continue to affirm that the lives of People of Color have value, not because they matter more than other lives, but because we have for too long believed the lie that they matter less. We, in these days, speak out against hate directed at Asian Americans not because they're the only people who shouldn't suffer hatred, but because such hate is so pointed right now. We work to more fully include and affirm our LGBTQ siblings in Christ because God has already welcomed them. We do this, all of this, as those who abide in God's love, in Christ's loving gift of himself. We hear the Spirit's voice moving us toward one another, branches connected to the same vine. We did not choose Jesus, and we might not have chosen one another. But he chooses us, for himself and for one another, that together we might experience the joy God has always intended for us and for all who would call upon God's name.
  
8. It is a strange new world into which the risen Christ calls us, a Kingdom in which the King gives his life for the sake of his subjects; a Kingdom in which the subjects are not subjects, but friends with their Lord. We are so used to things falling apart, to disorder and death, that it can be hard to find our footing here. But the risen Christ calls us here, commanding us to bear fruit. The other morning, I came downstairs and discovered one of the boys reading the Bible, a children's Bible used for Sunday school here at Grace.

After reading several stories with a similar theme, he exclaimed, "Dad, this whole book is about grapes!" I can see how he reached that conclusion, for seen in the light of God's Word, we are laborers in the vineyard whose thirst has been quenched by the wine that is the lifeblood of Christ; we are connected to the vine, and we are sent to bear fruit. It kind of is all about grapes! As you go, know that Christ goes with you, and that you abide in his love wherever you happen to find yourself. The world may fall apart around us, but we are home, now and forever, abiding in his love, bearing fruit to his glory. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.