

“Kept in Our Hearts”

May 17, 2020

Heart of the Matter series – 6th Sunday of Easter – Livestream

Graduation Sunday

During this time of sheltering in place, I’ve heard many stories of giving – “paying it forward” for a stranger at a drive-thru, businesses providing meals for frontline workers, neighbors checking on each other more often, volunteer grocery shoppers, and more. Last Sunday, there was a basket of goodies on my front porch, which was so kind!

To receive an act of grace like that is a blessing whether or not we know the giver. It feels good to receive, and there’s always hope that receiving encourages us to give, too. Giving leads to more giving.

The early church in the Book of Acts shows us the best of who we are and who we can be as followers of Jesus. They came together for worship, fellowship, meals, and prayer – as they shared their resources and gave to the needy. Because of their witness, people came to faith in Jesus Christ.

We’re at our best when we’re living our mission – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And though it’s been hard to be physically separated, it’s clear that the Holy Spirit is on the move! There’s a lot of talk in the larger church about how many people have been reached because we’re more accessible online and how many more people are connecting to a faith community. Does it look and feel differently? Absolutely! And yet still we serve a risen Christ who offers us amazing grace and calls us to share it however and wherever we’re able!

We’re living into this season of Easter and focusing on our hearts – where our motivation is for how we live in the spirit of resurrection and new life. And there’s been revival and renewal as we remember that the power of God isn’t contained in a building, though that physical space is important. The power of God dwells in us, it’s kept in our hearts.

It’s power to be together for worship, connect in new ways, and gather in prayer over the phone or social media. It’s power that challenges us to share what we have with those in need. It’s power so strong in us that it shows others Jesus Christ. But it all rests on the gift that Jesus offers – the Holy Spirit.

We pick up Jesus’ conversation with his disciples, and we learn more about the nature of his power. He promises the Holy Spirit will be with those who seek to love him and follow him. In fact, we can measure our love for Jesus Christ by keeping his commandments. Maybe that statement seems strange – it did when I first said it to myself - so what does that mean? Jesus is clear: we show our love for him in loving others.

The way that Jesus speaks here is tricky. “If you love me,” he says. Has anyone ever used that lead-in on you, or have you used it? “If you love me, do this for me.”

Sometimes, we use that phrase to manipulate and get what we want. Or we use it as a way to make someone prove love to us.

But Jesus' motivation is different. Read on in John's Gospel, and Jesus says that our top priority is to love one another. There's a connection between our relationship with him and our behavior toward others. We can talk about how much we love Jesus all we want to, but our love for him is made real when we love others in his name. So Jesus' lead-in of "If you love me" is a way to bring the Kingdom of God into reality right now; it's not for his personal gain.

And Jesus knew how difficult loving others is. This isn't the *idea* of love. This is not a concept, but a way of life. Look back in John chapter 13 - Jesus demonstrated his love for the disciples by washing their feet and told them that they should love one another. He told them to believe in God and believe in him.

These are the commandments that he wants them to follow. If you love me, love one another and believe in me. And loving one another was how he served others and had compassion: feeding the hungry, touching the leper, healing the sick, lifting up women and treating them with care, seeking peace with justice, standing up to those in power when they were mistreating the most vulnerable, and going to the people on the edges of society.

Jesus knew that it was only by the grace of God that we could love in his name! Because I'll confess to you that there are plenty of people I find it difficult to love all the time. It's only with God's help that I can even try. It's that bit of perspective that I need - loving others as Jesus loves me.

But that doesn't change what Jesus says - that he expects us to love one another because we love him. It's not enough to say that we'll "do our best" because Jesus promises that the Spirit will help us. That power is available to us, and Jesus invites us to claim it.

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker that reads: *Honk if you love Jesus*. Anyone can honk, right? Jesus would say, "keep my commandments if you love me." Really keep them. Do the hard work of loving with love that sacrifices for the sake of others. Don't just say you love Jesus; words, like horn beeps, come easily. It's the follow-through that's more challenging.

Remember that Jesus is speaking here before he is crucified, before the glory of his resurrection, before he ascends into heaven. He's preparing his disciples for when he will not be with them in physical presence. So he promises the Holy Spirit - *parakletos* in Greek. Our translation calls the Spirit the "Companion," but that doesn't cover the extent of the Spirit's work in us. One word can't explain it. Rather, when we examine the word "Paraclete," we find that what the Spirit does is all that Jesus does. In Jesus' absence, the Holy Spirit will continue God's work in the world.

The word "Paraclete" covers a variety of functions: to encourage, to comfort or console, to call on for help in a time of need, and to appeal. Literally, "Paraclete" means

“the One called alongside.” So, the Holy Spirit does all that we can think of and more! Yet, the work of the Holy Spirit and its presence among us depend on our willingness to share in community. Jesus’ commandments are all based in relating to God and others.

Jesus’ words are a “going away” message of sorts – something that he wants the disciples to remember. He’s told them to love and shown them love, but then tells them again.

As we celebrate with our graduates, we may have advice for them as they move on to new adventures and challenges. I invite all of us to see a video called “Endless Seasons Ahead.” This is our hope and prayer for graduates – maybe even ourselves. **SHOW MEDIA**

Did you catch that our credentials are the fruit of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I keep remembering the first week of livestreaming in mid-March when someone put signs on the pews in our sanctuary to remind me that the fruit of the Spirit is who we are and what we’re called to be no matter if we’re together in the same space or not.

None of the fruit of the Spirit can be practiced without being in relationship with others. It would be easy to love, be kind, patient, gentle, and self-controlled if I didn’t have to deal with anyone else, but then I’m not being led by the Spirit!

When Jesus talks to the disciples, he speaks to them as a group. Whenever he says the word “you,” he’s saying it in the sense of “all of you.” He prepares them for his absence and assures them that even when he is gone, they will not be alone. Even as we’re not together in one place, we’re not alone. Jesus called them as a community, and he does the same with us. We have personal lives and personal faith, yes, but our faith is lived out within a larger community of faith.

Personal holiness and social holiness go together; they are intertwined. Holiness calls us to do the right thing, even when it’s not easy, even when it’s the hardest thing. Seeing ourselves as beloved of God and seeing one another as beloved is hard work, and it’s what the Holy Spirit helps us to do.

I read this: “The key is that Jesus is not asking us to prove our love to him, but to others. The love we feel for Jesus must be shared so that others will come to know that love for themselves.” Part of the mystery is that the more we love others, the more aware we become of God’s loving presence; and the more we are aware of God’s loving presence, the more we are able to really love others.

Jesus has promised us the Holy Spirit. With that promise comes responsibility on our end. If we claim to follow Jesus, we don’t have the luxury of “doing our own thing” anymore. Someone has said: “All Christians have a call; all are expected to use their lives so as to reveal the grace of the Holy Spirit working through them. It’s a tall order.”

Right now, we must witness to the hope that we have in Christ, as First Peter says. But don’t miss or dismiss the second part – to share that hope and be humble about it. In this time when it seems that tensions are higher and higher every day, when

all of us are growing weary, we must remember the call that Jesus gives – to love him and keep his commandments (including sacrificial love, which requires us to practice both patience and humility) while we live in and through this time together. Loving one another and caring about the welfare of others in love isn't optional; it's a command of Jesus.

The risen Christ is made visible *in* those who love him and keep his commandments. Mutual love and caring seen in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit continues to be made manifest in us and in the world around us. Friends, we worship a living God who is near to us. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as our Paraclete—the One who stands alongside us forever as Companion, Comforter, and Helper – and we all need the Holy Spirit. We are not alone. God is faithful. The Spirit is kept in our hearts.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Sing “Spirit of the Living God” as we prepare to pray together...