

Sharing the Gift

John 14:23-29

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 16:9-15

May 1, 2016 Easter 6C

A week ago yesterday, we celebrated an end and a beginning—the end of Meredith Moder’s nurse’s training with her graduation, and the beginning of her new career as a registered nurse. Yesterday, we observed and reflected upon an end and a beginning—the end of our beloved friend Margaret Sutton’s journey on earth, and the beginning of her new life in heaven with Jesus Christ. In our beginnings, in our ends, and in our new beginnings, God is there with us.

Our scripture from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John is likewise about an end and a beginning—in this case, the end of their time together on earth, and the beginning of the new age, when the apostles would be strengthened by God’s Spirit to spread the good news. Last week, we talked about Jesus commanding his disciples to love one another. He told them that people would come to know them—and God—by their love. This passage, and today’s scripture too, are part of a long discourse of Jesus, set in the upper room, where they had gathered for their last meal. Unlike the other gospels, John doesn’t say anything about the meal itself, although the setting is that of their final meal together. The discourse begins after the foot washing at the beginning of chapter 13, and goes clear to the end of chapter 16—over 110 verses. They are final instructions—teachings that would prepare them for the time that he would no longer be with them physically. Jesus is preparing his disciples for the troubles ahead—troubles which would begin with his arrest later that evening. Our passage begins as an answer to a question. Jesus had said “I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too.” (vv.18-19) and had gone on to say that as they would live in love, he would be revealed to them. Then Judas—the other Judas, not the betrayer—asked “Lord, why are you about to reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” (v. 22) It was a natural question for Nice Judas ask. All through his ministry, Jesus was revealing things to them that he told not to tell anyone else. All through his ministry, Jesus had been healing people and saying, “don’t tell anyone.” Was this time of tension and drama in Jerusalem going to be the time that all would be revealed? That the Kingdom of God would come and Christ would rule in glory? Would Jesus do something that would force all the people who misunderstood him to realize who he was?

No, Jesus didn’t work that way. Instead, he went on to say “Whoever loves me will keep my word. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Those who love Jesus will receive God and Jesus as a house guest. The old word for “make my home with” is “abide.”

"Abide with me." Barbara Brown Taylor in *Good News for Orphans* wrote, "I am a little fuzzy on the details as John himself is, but abiding seems to involve becoming a part of a large extended family, and a holy one at that. When God and Jesus move in with us, apparently, they made lots of keys—keys for the Holy Spirit, keys for the other disciples, keys for all kinds of indwelling cousins in Christ. Coming and going, we learn to recognize each other and to call upon each other for everything that people who live together do."¹ (unquote)

Jesus was getting ready to go away, yet he was promising them that he would somehow still be with them—not in the flesh, but in the spirit—not just a vague, generalized in the spirit, but in the Spirit of God. God's Spirit would make itself real to them. God's Spirit would be by their side. God's Spirit would be their advocate. God's Spirit would give them the faith and the courage that they needed to do God's work.

In addition to the Spirit, Jesus granted them peace. This wasn't just a peace that meant an absence of conflict—it was God's peace—Jesus' peace. It was the inner peace that would let them know that no matter what happened, Jesus' peace, God's peace, would be at work in their hearts, and would never let them go.

William Alexander Percy wrote a wonderful poem about this peace. It goes like this.

They cast their nets in Galilee
Just off the hills of brown
Such happy simple fisherfolk
Before the Lord came down.

Contented peaceful fishermen
Before they ever knew
The peace of God That fill'd their hearts
Brimful and broke them too.

Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
Homeless, in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head-down was crucified.

The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Good News for Orphans*, quoted in "Finding Tomorrow Today," a sermon on Day1.org

Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing—
The marvelous peace of God.²

This peace of God, and the Spirit of God empowering their hearts, would later enable the disciples to become apostles, so that they could share their gifts, share the Gospel, with others. Once that sharing got started, it never stopped.

Our lesson from Acts shows that process in action. Paul was a johnny-come-lately apostle, not one of the original disciples, who received his marching orders to serve Jesus on the Damascus road. Last Sunday, we heard how God convinced Peter that the Gospel, the good news, was for everyone, not just Jews. Paul, also, was commissioned to take the Gospel out into the world to Jew and Gentile alike. On one of his trips through the provinces of Asia Minor, now called Turkey, Paul was having obstacles to his plans put in his way—that's a sign that God's plans and his plans weren't meshing. Then had another vision, this one during the night. Paul saw a Macedonian, a Greek in other words, saying "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" So he changed his plans, and along with Luke and other helpers, crossed the body of water that separated Asia from Europe. The Gospel had already spread into Africa, and now it was crossing into Europe—closer to the heart of the Roman Empire.

They came to a city called Philippi, named after the father of Alexander the Great. It was now a Roman colony, which meant that both in its past and present, it was a city of power and importance. There they went to the riverbank just beyond the city gate, to find a quiet place to worship. A woman was there, Lydia. Lydia was a God-fearing Gentile. That meant that she worshiped the God of Israel without converting to Judaism. She was a merchant, who dealt in a luxurious product—purple cloth. Here's what William Barclay says about her: "Lydia came from the very top end of the social scale: she was a purple merchant. The purple dye had to be gathered drop by drop from a certain shell-fish and was so costly that to die a pound of wool with it would take the equivalent of 150 pounds in our money. Lydia, wealthy woman and merchant prince that she was, was won for Christ."³ She and some other women were worshiping on the riverbank, perhaps because they weren't allowed in the synagogue with the men. She heard about Jesus Christ, the Spirit opened her heart, and she became the first Christian convert in Europe. It didn't stop there, though. She invited Paul and his companions to be her house guest, to use her home as the base of operations for his mission in Philippi. She received the gift of the Gospel, and offered the gift of hospitality and support.

² William Alexander Percy, *They Cast Their Nets*, Copyright by Edward B. Marks Music Corporation.

³ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Daily Study Bible, Westminster Press, 1976, p. 122.

Today, God still offers us the Holy Spirit to us, and as we turn our lives over to God, the Spirit gives us power to live out and witness to the Gospel. Today, God still offers God's peace to us, so that in our hearts we have the confidence that God loves us with a love that will never let us go. Today God still gives us opportunities like the one Lydia received and accepted, to offer our hospitality, love, resources, and finances to make the church come alive. God has given us a great and wonderful gift, the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's a gift that we are invited to share. Amen.

by Michael Dixon