

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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ALSO

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 9, 2021

ACTS 10;44-48 | PSALM 98

I JOHN 5;1-6 | JOHN 15;9-17

My mother has been dead almost ten years now. As Mother's Day arrives once again, I feel her near me. I lean in. I follow a memory to its end, hoping a turn or a doorway opens up. I have been watching her, watching the two of us, more closely. She doesn't seem to mind.

I never fail to feel her immense energy, to see her in every part of the house and yard, gracefully attending to her many tasks. I have four siblings. I see them there as well. To them, she is the cheerful commanding officer, or an annoying rival competing for my father's attention. To them, she is quick on her feet, adaptive, but stretched thin.

I realize my sense of her is completely different. By accident of birth, I came along as she was letting go of having to do things by the book, of being in control of every detail, of sweating the small stuff. My strongest memories of her are at rest or contemplation - in her garden, in her reading chair, or at church - sitting quietly, reflecting, listening, at prayer.

I have realized just now, maybe for the first time, that I love being in church because I love being with her. It's not so much that my mother was a church lady, because she wasn't. But when she was there, she knew what she had to do. It probably didn't happen until midway through, after the third child. At some point she realized she should just sit still and listen. She realized that quietly and deliberately letting God know what was on her heart led her beside still waters, set her down in green pastures, and restored her soul.

A boy of 8, or 12, or 16, has no words for this. But such a child can feel it, can know it. Even when I was going through my adolescent turmoil, her serenity, her forcefield of acceptance, her gratitude, and her strength, in a word, her faith, commanded my attention. I didn't know to call it faith. But I did know that I did not want to leave it. More! I knew I needed it.

She is right here this morning, reflected in the words of Holy Scripture. I see it now. She took to heart that she did not choose God, but that God had chosen her. God chose her to be the loving heart of our family, to abide in Jesus so as to keep loving us, so that the fruit of love would define us.

God invited her to that friendship that compelled her to respond to every need with an open mind, even and especially to the needs beyond our tribe and family. Her good works did not make headlines. They were often anonymous. I'm sure she failed to respond at times to suffering and injustice that she thought was beyond her reach. But always she prayed. Always she acted. She found joy in the process.

Still, the point is, Jesus demands that we ask questions, so that we would learn to love what God loves. If we do that, if we so challenge ourselves, we find joy in that process.

Do we say our prayers just hoping they will get past the first pew, perhaps escape out the window, and fear they fall at the slightest

resistance. Or like my mother, do we take Jesus at his word. Abide in me. Love one another as I have loved you. Go out on a limb, but stay close. And having done that, ask what you want, it will be right there, possible, doable. In faith we have victory. Love will conquer, overcome, provide.

What about you? Can you quiet yourself just enough. Put down your guard just enough. Can you stop saying it is impossible? Will you listen? Will you abide? Will you dare to ask God for what is on your heart, what is the real need of your family? What is the real need of your community?

For instance, some go before God and the world and say: Black Lives Matter. Others reply: All Lives Matter. And in that conversation we argue past each other, generating only heat, and no light, remaining strangers to one another.

We get stuck here because we have not turned this conversation into prayer. We have not forced ourselves to ask something of God that requires the faith and loyalty of two friends coming to agreement. Jesus promises that if we love one another as he has loved us, if we accept his divine friendship, we will stop defining love by our lesser attachments, and then, together, we will do greater things than he did. This is astonishing. Do we believe it?

Someone will say: All Lives Matter. Another, filled with the Spirit, will reply: Black Lives (also) matter. And in that one word, that slight shift of perspective, people and communities can change.

All Lives Matter, sure. Black Lives (also) matter. Lives that are trafficked across borders (also) matter. Lives trapped in an education system that fails to prepare our children for the real world (also) matter. Our Neighbor's Lives (also) Matter. Add that one word to your prayers. And see who Jesus is inviting you to share his divine friendship, to serve.

Love one another as I have loved you. Don't ask what is wrong with someone. Come alongside them and ask, what has happened to you. As a church, as a society, there is no joy unless we return to the border, where the children are, and find a place for them. Let us get a vaccine, not for ourselves, but because we love our neighbor.

Ask me whatever you will, and it will be done for you. I see my mother, sitting so still, formulating her prayers. In her presence, I am learning what to care about. What a blessing today, if every mother, every child, turned to ask her friend Jesus, who else is a part of the family? Who (also) shall I serve?

And together, this love gains strength, multiplies. We do the right thing, the best thing. Together, friends, we truly believe the greater things are our birthright, our inheritance, what we live for.