

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2021

When Rachel Held Evans, a recent theologian, was a little girl around 10 years old, she had a skin allergy which caused her great pain, made her feel isolated from her friends and family members, and filled her with questions which grieved her heart. One night, as she was trying to fall asleep in the midst of the angst of pain and despair, she cried her heart out to God. Her father, who happened to be a pastor, heard his sweet daughter's lament, rushed to her room, and knelt by her bed to comfort her. She blurted out the question, "Dad, why did Jesus let this happen to me?" Now that was THE BIG question that had been turning around in her mind at night as her body itched, burned, and refused to fall asleep. How could a good God let this happen to a small child? "Rachel, I don't know," her dad said. "But I do know that God loves you." This answer stunned Rachel. *Her father didn't know?* Rachel thought her father knew everything about God. He was a theologian and a biblical scholar. And yet, his answer of "I don't know" was a beautiful gift to her. He helped her learn that it is okay to question God. It's okay to say, "I don't know." It's okay to be angry at God, it's okay to stumble on the path as we work our way to peace. Rachel went on to be a theologian in her own right and an author of many books, affirming that in the midst of all our questions, we are fully loved by God.

John's farewell discourse in today's gospel opens us up to be fully loved by God. It is the reason and basis for our understanding of the completeness of God's love and grace for us—in the midst of our angst, despair, and pain – in the midst of our questioning or wondering or even anger at God – it is what reassures us that, through prayer we can always bump into the mystery we call God and be made whole. As Rachel said, "The essence of the Divine is love. In the midst of your questions, you are fully loved right now, just as you are."

John's gospel offers a unique revelation of this truth of God's love. For John's gospel portrays the relationship between Jesus and God as one of complete unity, into which we are always invited, and through prayer we are always welcomed.

This seamlessness between Jesus and God in John's gospel differs from the narratives in the synoptic gospels, or those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for in those gospels there is a stated distance between Jesus, the Son and God, the Father. In those gospels, Jesus both seeks and regrets God's will, especially when we look closely at the crucifixion narratives. There is a distance between the one who prays and the one to whom he prays. In Luke's gospel, we have Jesus crying with a loud voice, saying, "Father into your hands, I commend my spirit," a release into something other than his own spirit at his crucifixion. In both Mark's and Matthew's gospels, we have Jesus crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!", speaking of at least a momentary rupture or distance between the Father and the Son.

However, in John's gospel, from the beginning, when the Word was God, to the crucifixion, when Jesus proclaims on the cross that "It is finished" – the plan and mission of God and Jesus has been completed, we understand the unity between Jesus and God, which reveals the very nature of the divine, is into which we enter as we pray.

Our passage this morning is often referred to as that of the “priestly prayer” as Jesus is praying on behalf of us – his disciples. And this is actually where this understanding of the unity of Jesus and God begins to make a difference to us. For if we know that prayer brings us into this essence and the unity of the divine, then we know prayer changes us, sanctifies us, and sets us apart to reveal God’s glory in our world, for any exposure to the holy shifts our hearts, moves our souls, and transforms our being to be more like God.

Sometimes this transformational place can be a scary place, for it is often a thin space where we are asked to release that which we hold most dearly, or that which we believe must happen if we can continue to believe that God is a good God. Or it is a space where we reveal our deepest and truest secrets to a God, who of course, already knows our truth. It can be a place of reparation and restoration; it can be a place where we feel the distance from God more poignantly than we could have imagined before; yet Jesus is there with and for us. That’s part of the good news. We don’t travel this path to becoming more like God alone. Jesus is there, waiting for us.

And we grow closer to God through our prayer. As we do so, we find, rather seamlessly, we are bound more fully to one another, as God is. This is the only possible outcome. This is then how the glory of God is revealed through our lives, as it was through the earthly ministry of Jesus. Somehow, things seem to have travelled a full circle.

For have you ever noticed that, when you experience the unity of the divine, there is often a burning desire inside of you to give it away. I imagine this is true for you, for it always is for me, when you leave the altar rail, after lingering so your heart can be touched by the holy, there’s a particular joy, or comfort, or sense of purpose, or just plain love, that you want to give away, to share, to invite others into. We often see this as children receive the Eucharist, they often skip down the aisle afterwards, filled with the Spirit of love, which of course, is wonderfully contagious.

This yearning to share the love of Christ (that term we use to encompass the divine love which was before time and will continue through eternity) shows up in our response of hospitality toward one another– that deep and radical hospitality that finds the space for God to fill with love, where that hadn’t seemed possible before. Our hearts can be open to one another when our hearts are filled with God’s love. And when our hearts are filled with God’s love, we are living the good life. When we set ourselves and our lives within the holy love, through prayer, through sacrament, through service; when we strive to become that holy love in our world- that’s a life that’s so good that you just want to share it.

One of the most memorable moments I have thus far experienced at St. Andrew’s was when I was speaking to someone who came into our church a few years ago, and when I followed up and asked her about her experience, she said, “When I walked through the doors, I was met by this wave of love.” That means we’re living the good life here, we’re in touch with the holy, we’re yearning for the divine; we’re asking the questions; we’re creating safe space for spiritual exploration; we’re beginning to comprehend how the good life means a just life for all, for that is the only way it can be – for that’s what God’s love is always about – justice for all.

Knowing the love of God is the source of happiness and it is the source of generosity and hospitality. Our gospel lesson takes place at the Last Supper in John’s gospel. If we think about this for a minute, the setting is both at the time of Jesus’ greatest model of hospitality where he washed the feet of his disciples, and at the moment when he knew that he was about to be crucified and lose

everything, even his life. Jesus says this to the Father, “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” Jesus’s joy is his love for his people.

I have been offering moments of joy nearly weekly in the recorded services and I have been speaking of them as the in-breaking of the resurrection, which I believe is true – and I also believe they are moments of joy for they bring up in me the love I share with all of you, but especially those I mention in my moments of joy. It’s love, it’s resurrection, it’s Jesus that brings us joy.

The good life, a life in Christ, is the life of joy and delight, our joy and God’s joy, mingled together. And the surest sign of that joy is that we have the confidence to be hospitable and generous to all, just as Jesus is to us. Thus, we can be like the blessed ones in our psalm: “They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.”

Rachel Held Evans wrote: “This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there’s always room for more.” Let’s keep inviting more into this beautiful kingdom of Love.

Sisters and brothers, continue to live the Good life in God, so we can continue to be generous and hospitable.