

As
First Reading - Psalm 133
Second Reading - John 15:9-17

Six words. Six words that have spurred the pharmaceutical industry's growth in the niche market of anxiety medication for clergy. Just six words — I thought you ought to know... It is certainly a phenomenon in every parish, but I particularly remember, in those days before caller ID, when I was still new enough to the ministry that when the phone would ring, I would sense an immediate quickening in my heart rate, not in joyous anticipation but in anxious fear of what answering the phone would ultimately call forth from me. Had someone died? Was someone angry about what I said in a sermon? Had there been an accident, and a member was being rushed to the ER? Was a stranger 6 hours away from eviction and four months behind in rent, looking for a lifeline?

If I'm being honest, I still experience the same physical reaction to the ringtone of my phone, but back in the day, I remember one frequent caller whose voice, so lavishly infused with magnolia and molasses, would immediately transform my fear into this strange mixture of irritation, defensiveness, and a mind-bending scramble to decipher what was being asked of me. "How are you doing on this fine May morning? How are your

parents these days? I love your sweet mother.” The pleasantries were genuine and heartfelt, but my anxiety remained undiminished, because I knew what was coming. Six words — I thought you ought to know... Seemingly innocuous, sometimes helpful, but layered with unspoken meaning — equal parts: a) I knew something before you did ... b) how did you not know this and why haven't you already acted on it? ... c) I know exactly what you should do about it, but I'm not going to tell you what it is. This is a test graded with prejudice, so the best I can hope for is a D. Little did I know she was training me in one of ministry's more important skills — swallow hard and smile big ... but smile in a way that artfully masks your gritted teeth.

However, I wouldn't trade my friendship with that sainted elder for anything, for apart from her desire to remain one step in front of the preacher, Eleanor radiated a warmth to all who entered our sanctuary, fervently shepherded our church members, safeguarding against the possibility that anyone would fall through the cracks, and enduringly exhibiting concern and compassion for our family long after I was gone. Any irritation I felt with her was quickly eclipsed by a profound gratitude for her. The arc of my life would be diminished without her presence along the way.

Gene had been a good golfer, the kind of golfer good enough to gamble at it and come out faring pretty well. Yet, in the years before I met him, he gave up the game cold turkey, because he knew that sticking with the lifestyle could well have a negative impact on his family. All it took was a baby girl and the clubs were quickly moth-balled. He was a pharmacist by trade and carried around with him a bit of a food baby. Occasionally, he'd drop by the church in his 70's era Jeep Cherokee, you know, the ones with the big white-rimmed wheels.

Walking into my office he'd announce, "Let's go get something to eat," and though I have never possessed a single molecule of spontaneity, I'd grab my coat and we'd head out. After pausing at his house to feed the ugliest dog I had ever seen, Gene would chauffeur me to some of the more unique outlets in the culinary world.

The one thing all these places had in common was that slaw was not a side dish but an essential element to the entree itself. Gene introduced this shy midwesterner to this epicurean masterpiece known as a shrimp burger (It was like a whole fried shrimp dinner dumped on a bun and carpeted with slaw and pickles. In other words - Genius!). Or maybe he'd take me to

Homer's, at least everyone knew it as Homer's even though the sign outside said Windy City Grill. It was your typical southern fast-food fare — burgers, pulled pork, hot dogs, sweet tea, with slaw on everything but the tea — only Homer's served their fare with a twist. There were no prices listed on the overhead letter board menu, and the crusty old servers never wrote down a thing. The short-order cook would just hand the bag to the cashier, who would take the briefest peek inside, and announce, "Umm. That'll be four dollars and 33 cent." He just mysteriously pulled the number from the air. There was even a sign on the wall that said, "The cost of the food will vary according to the attitude of the customer."

Gene once took me to this ramshackle dive in the boonies outside of Claremont, which itself is in the heart of the sticks. If the Soup Nazi was from Catawba County and served pork loin sandwiches, covered with ? (slaw), instead of soup, this would have been his place. Nervous patrons approached the assembly line, knowing that there was a specific place where a specific person, would offer a specific glance, whereupon you would offer a specific order within the allotted span of half a nanosecond. Any deviation from the routine would render you both porkless and hungry.

Such journeys for this young pastor were a true blessing and ministry for me. Oh, the food was fun, but Gene's presence and down to earth wisdom, worldview, and sense of humor were priceless. He had such a level headed capacity to break down the complex into common sense. He helped to navigate me through numerous challenges and challenging personalities.

Sometimes, in a Session meeting, an elder would get a little carried away with the sound of their own voice, and Gene would look at me with the slightest grin, and he'd take his forefinger and subtly touch the edge of his eye. Without a word spoken, except for the sound of the droning elder's voice, I would know the exact thought Gene and I were simultaneously sharing. "My eyes are starting to glaze over and it may be time to yank this train back onto the tracks." Gene was what you might call a go-to guy. Always handy, steady and unflappable, Gene was the guy to call. Crises calming. Pickles unpickled. Prickly cacti dethorned. Jumps when the battery failed. Rides when the weather raged. I've asked you before who it is you would call if your car broke down or you were in an accident. Gene was our guy. Now, I don't recall Gene ever attending a bible study, but he walked the walk of the Gospel daily, and I miss him.

Gene and Eleanor are just two of the hundreds of saints I have known, whose presence in my life and the lives of many others, offer clear and enduring testimony to the truth Jesus revealed. *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

Continuing and expanding upon the vine/branch/stem/fruit image of the preceding verses we explored last week, Jesus is laying the foundation for his future church. As I repeatedly remind the folks in our bible study, we gain a deeper understanding of scripture when we study it on three different levels and consider three different audiences.

First, we read the text on the level of the event described, i.e we read it as participants on the shore of the sea of Galilee, or on the slope of the mount where Jesus taught and fed the multitude, or in the Jerusalem temple during the build up to Passover, or at Golgotha witnessing the cruelty of the cross.

Second, we read it as that first audience to hear the gospel account. That would be a separate time and a different context from the event described. How did the world change between the time of the event and the time of the first reading? What was happening in the environs of that first audience hearing the written Word?

Third, we read it in our own context. What is similar and what has changed since the event, and since the first reading of the later account of the event as written in the Gospel? What dynamics of human relations remain the same? How does the ancient event speak to our context?

In regard to today's text, think about the context of when Jesus said these things. Jesus is in Jerusalem during preparations for Passover. Though he entered the city being celebrated and hailed as a king, the mood has turned somber as the forces of opposition coalesce. He is gathered with his disciples for what will be known as John's version of the Last Supper. However, the focus here is not as much on the bread and cup, but on the startling decision Jesus makes to rise, take a cloth along with a basin of water, and wash the feet of the disciples, an act of intense humility and self-giving love. He offers an extended prayer and farewell for his disciples and

those who would follow them. After they depart from the meal, he will be arrested, tried, and crucified.

Thus, this would be a salient moment to leave his followers with the essential lesson he would have them take from their time together. *“As the Father has loved me (as - adverb - to the same degree, amount, or extent; similarly; equally), so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

Combine this with something Jesus said during this same meal and we are given a clearer knowledge of the role of the church in any age. *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you ...*

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will

live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” God’s love flows to the Son, through the Spirit, into our fellowship.

Our hope and strength in a chaotic world is to abide in these relationships. *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”*

Fast forward a few decades, and the first audience to John’s gospel would certainly be comforted and called by these words. For they were starting to feel closed in and threatened. Simultaneously, they were facing persecution from the Romans on one side and expulsion from the synagogue from the other side. Therefore, their relationships shared together in Christ through the Spirit were life-sustaining and spirit enriching.

And wouldn’t that be no less true for us today? Jesus said, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* John would write, *“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”*

Remove the relationships born, nurtured and sustained through the community of faith, Christ's church, from my life, and what you've got is the penultimate scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, and I'm Margaret Hamilton, sans the broom — "I'm melting." Paul would tell you the same — *"If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."*

So, thank you, Eleanor, Gene, D.A., Ken, Jimmy, Leisa, Terry, Guy, Bob, Janet, Bill and the whole litany of saints who have nurtured and sustained me, and with whom I have come to know the truth of the 46th Psalm — *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea."*

No matter the context, Ken greets you like an early summer morn, invariably bright and smiling and warm — beaming countenance, vigorous handshake, inquiring hospitality — "Tell me what is going on in your life." Always organized, always put together, always sharply dressed, always eloquent in conversation or handwritten communication. I've often said that if I was President, I'd want Ken to be my chief of staff. Clerk of Session, chair of stewardship, chair of Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, if the

call went out, he answered the call, and he possesses perhaps the essential characteristic of a church elder — He is reasonable and kind. And understand, this is a guy who spent two years as a kid in a state’s children’s home because his parents were not in a healthy condition to be parents for him.

Ken’s an insurance executive, and thus, is polished and business-like in meetings, and one time we were up at Union Seminary in Richmond interviewing candidates for an associate position. We were meeting this energetic young kid, who would eventually, years later, become the pastor of one of the largest churches in our denomination, but at that time he was about to graduate and possessed no clarity about what direction he was going. But he had energy.

So, very formally, reasonably, and with kindness, Ken was leading the candidate through the questions we had prepared for the interview — Remember, Ken is formal, dignified, put together — So, in the candidate’s answer to one of Ken’s questions, suddenly, the candidate says energetically, kind of bouncing in his seat, “You know, I’m really into high-fives. Give me a high-five (putting his hand up before Ken’s face).” ... And Ken — stunned,

nonplussed, eyes instantly inflated to saucer size — he looks around, all deer in the headlights, and ever so slowly, he tentatively lifts his hand and just touches the candidate's hand as if he's checking to see if a cup is too hot.

I about fell out. That scene alone was worth the 37 years of ordained ministry. Jesus said, *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

Do you know this joy? Do you understand what a gift the Lord continues to give in places like this, among people as curious and flawed and diverse as us? Don't leave this day without bringing to mind at least one person, in this or another congregation, without whom your life would be sorely diminished. And don't limit yourself to just one. For there is a whole cloud of witnesses and saints, past and present, through whom Christ's love flows, nurtures, sustains, and redeems. Name the names to yourself, and where possible reach out and tell them what they have meant in your faith journey. For what is possible here is the closest thing this side of heaven to that for which the Psalmist prayed —

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,

running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore. Amen.