

“Do This and They Will Know”

Spring is a season of celebration for my immediate and extended family. There are a number of birthdays and anniversaries in these months, and we mark the time by planning parties and moving from one celebration to the next. There is some of this same flow in our community and church. Graduations have happened or will soon, weddings are being planned and baptisms are taking place, we confirmed the faith of young people just a couple of weeks ago, and in the worship life of the church we are in a season called, “Eastertide.” This is the period of 50 days following our celebration on Easter morning. 50 days of Easter. Why is it important to recognize we are in a season of resurrection? Well, we don’t want to lose sight of the truth that Christ is risen and the fact of the matter is our attention gets scattered at times. We have a tendency to fall back into our usual routines and this is not the most faithful position in the season of resurrection. When God’s resurrection power is at work it is not business as usual. The point is, Easter is more than a single day, it is a way of life. About this we are clear. The living presence of Christ brings life to us and so, in this Eastertide season, we celebrate the risen Christ every time we gather as God’s people.

I mention the celebrations in my family. These events allow us to focus on special moments and memories that bring us hope. We need that and for obvious reasons. There is a lot of trouble in the world. The trouble includes such things as political strife within our country and around the world. There’s plenty of talk just now about economic pressure from the trade war with China. Daily there are reports in the news of violence where innocent people are hurt, or worse. Celebrations are important, not just to take our minds off of the struggle but to assure us that life brings joy and goodness and blessing. Remember the resurrection? We are not defeated. Remember the truth of the gospel? Nothing can separate us from the love of God. This good news is worthy to stand on its own without any challenge from whatever bad news may come our way. I recently read an article that had an interesting take on the subject. The author gives this example. He invites us to imagine that we are gathered on the occasion of the 50th wedding anniversary of close family members. With your mind’s eye see yourself at that kind of party. Grandma and Grandpa are the couple being honored. It’s a beautiful occasion. Now, as we celebrate their long life together we would never suggest that in the middle of the party someone pick up a microphone and say, “We’re here to honor the long partnership of this couple but let’s remember that 23 years ago Grandma and Grandpa’s marriage almost fell apart. Let’s not forget,” the person with the mic would say, “we’re celebrating 50 years but they almost didn’t make it.” We wouldn’t do that. We would not compromise the joy of that celebration with that kind of negativity. It is more than OK to let the good news that brings us together be exactly what it is, good news. I’m making the point because there’s the potential to feel the good news of the resurrection is compromised this morning by our reading from the 13th chapter of John’s Gospel. Turning to that scripture moves us back to what happened on the last night of Jesus’ earthly life. That’s the scene in the 13th chapter of John, and it was a dark and foreboding time. Some may question, “Why are we doing this? If we’re all about the resurrection this morning, why are we muddying the waters by remembering the events that led to Jesus’ crucifixion and death?” These are important questions. So let’s take a closer look. Are we compromising the good news this morning or are we taking hold of the good news in ways that make it even stronger?

There are things happening in the 13th chapter of John that we didn’t read aloud but have everything to do with the words Jesus speaks in today’s scripture. The scene is a room where Jesus is gathered with his disciples. As they prepare to share a meal Jesus washes their feet. In an action that identifies himself as a servant to all, Jesus performs a task that only the lowest of the servant-help would do. With a towel and a basin, kneeling in front of his followers, Jesus washes their feet. Then he says to them, “I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you.” This was his last opportunity to teach them and gives a powerful example of what it means to be his followers. They were called to serve. They were not called to be right. They were not called to be successful. They were not called to be better than others or to be more perfect in the way they lived. They were called to serve. Then, as the story continues, Jesus names the thing that brings darkness to the whole evening. “Someone,” he says, “will betray me.” With that, Jesus breaks off a piece of bread and hands it to Judas, identifying Judas as the one who will set in motion the events of the crucifixion. This is no celebration supper now. The party takes a hard turn. Sitting at the table with his closet disciples this could have been a joyous affirmation of relationship but it becomes something else entirely. The scene is wrapped in betrayal. Weakness and brokenness and fear fill the air. As Judas goes off to do his dirty deed, I’m sure an uncomfortable silence fell upon everyone at the table. But Jesus never let silence have the last word. In response to an action of betrayal that would break anyone’s heart, Jesus speaks the words we’ve read this morning, “Love one another. Love one another, as I have loved you. This is my

commandment, love. ” It’s stunning what Jesus focuses on in that moment. In response to betrayal, aware of the death that is coming to him, Jesus focuses on love. He didn’t criticize Judas. He didn’t point to Judas’ empty place and say, “I’m glad he’s gone. We don’t need his kind at our table.” No, Jesus commanded his disciples to love. Jesus called the disciples to serve and commanded them to love, and to do this in the most challenging context of their life together. We who follow Jesus today are given the same teaching and that’s why this reading connects to the season of Easter. Resurrection is a way of life and Christ offers resurrection life to us by calling us to serve and commanding us to love. There is no context of our lives or in this world that removes us from the priority to do these things, to serve and to love.

I would not expect you to constantly think about the issues facing the United Methodist Church in response to the Special General Conference earlier this year, but you are probably not surprised that I do. The issue of the conference centered on human sexuality, the LGBTQ community, and full inclusion in the church. Not a day goes by when a congregation member or staff member, a clergy colleague or friend, or some written commentary, email, or news article brings the issue to the forefront of my thoughts. I mention the conflict in the United Methodist Church again today because Jesus’ commandment to love speaks to our experience. Jesus didn’t seem to care all that much about correct theology, except to challenge those who insisted everyone else believe and practice their faith in the same way they did. Jesus was a rabbi and as such taught scripture. He never insisted a group of people interpret scripture in a particular way. Theology had its place with Jesus but it wasn’t his main thing. Nor did he insist that the interpretation of scripture must follow a particular way of thought. And, of course, Jesus didn’t say one word about the issues of human sexuality that are dividing the church today. What Jesus commanded us to do is love one another in the way he’s loved us. This is how the world will know we follow him.

Full inclusion of the LGBTQ community is the issue but the division in the church is just as much the result of some who are saying, “If you want to be with us you must think like us, and be like us, and do church like us.” Responding to differences in this way is not how the world comes to know we are Christ followers. “Love as I have loved you,” This is how they will know.

There’s a problem with the 50 days of Eastertide. It’s only 50 days. We are raised up to serve and to love all the days of our lives. On the hardest day and on the best day they will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.