

Sixth Sunday of Easter – 2020

Acts 17:16-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

There is nothing more beautiful on this earth than Christ's church. That is not a boast, nor is it a remark that is meant to deprecate other beautiful things, nor is it a subjective value judgment from one poor preacher looking for a flowery phrase; it is simply a statement of theological truth, a statement of divine truth. There is nothing on this earth more beautiful than Christ's church. There are many, many wonderful and beautiful and inspiring things on this earth and all of them in some way or another are a window into or an extension of our Triune God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In fact, that's precisely what *makes* things beautiful – that they are of God. There is nothing more beautiful on this earth than Christ's church. That means you, that means this glorious moment in this glorious setting, that means our blessed congregation and her corporate life of faith, that means the whole Christian Church on earth – there is nothing more beautiful on this earth than Christ's church.

"How's that?", you ask. How can that be, because we are just a misfit group of ragamuffin sinners. There's not a single commandment any of us have kept perfectly this week. We are full of lust and greed, selfish in every way imaginable, void of love at critical moments, we talk entirely too much about ourselves when given the slightest chance, we gladly forget the unfortunate, we fail to forgive, we put the worst construction on the behavior of those who displease us while we explain even our ugliest behaviors as being totally understandable, totally justified. In a spiritual beauty contest, we look like granny from the Beverly Hillbillies, we look like Elvira Gulch on her bicycle, or Boris Karloff in a horror movie. That is true. And that is part of this picture, part of the beauty which you are called to see, called upon to witness, called to confess.

Let's start with the first words from the Gospel reading: [Jesus said] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). That is a promise. That is a declaration of how things are. That is the living reality that defines who you are as a Christian. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. The Lord Christ is not offering a potential spiritual truth only for super believers. He is not giving voice to an abstract or theoretical notion that perhaps may be the case for some but not for others. This is a solid declaration of His love in action, a declaration of His beauty in the real lives of real sinners. If you love me, you will keep (hold, treasure, embrace) my commandments. I know that you love the crucified King. I know that you love the Lord of cross and tomb. Love has drawn you here. You love because He first loved you (1 John 4:19). Love doesn't return empty, but accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). He gave Himself up for you (Ephesians 5:2). You know it and His love is alive in you. He put Himself between you and death, He put Himself between you and judgment, He put Himself between you and hell. You know it and His love is now very much alive in you. It is divine love that has done all this on your behalf – to give and give and give.

When you were unlovely, in fact when you were love's enemy, love's antithesis – God gave Himself to you, Love gave Himself to you. That is the beautiful thing about you, the beautiful thing that you have received, the beautiful thing that is alive in you. He became horrific on the

cross; like one from whom the clean and the upright hide their faces (Isaiah 53:3). All that is low and base and vain and gross – He took it, He *became* it (2 Corinthians 5:21) because that is what Divine Love does. And you have seen it; with the eyes of your heart you have seen it – your mind and your heart have been awakened to this superlative reality. The crucified One is radiantly beautiful precisely as He is crucified. That love is for you. That love has transformed you. Wretched creature that you were, wretched creature that you remain (*simul justus et peccator*) – that love has made you new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The love of God in you makes you despise lust, despise greed and turn away from it. You repent of your sin because love is alive in you. You are transformed from a selfish boor into a one who desires to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself. Love has drawn you here. The Third Commandment has drawn you here. In the midst of a legal risk, in the midst of scorn from others who believe that going to church is a selfishness, a senseless act of rebellion against governmental guidelines. You are here because Christ's love compels you to be here and that is beautiful. There is nothing more beautiful on earth than Christ's church. Do you know why that is? Because the Lord Christ is in the midst of her – to give Himself to her, to bless her and sustain her, to share His life with her, to forgive her and strengthen her and cleanse her and make her holy. And the church receives His love with joy, returning to Him our thanks and praise. It is a contemporary manifestation of all of Christian History, all of holy history, right in this place. He is the One who is among us as one who serves (Luke 22:27). That is beautiful. The Greatest serves the least – you and me. We receive that service in faith. That is beautiful. Christ's cross is held aloft in this place – literally and in our hearts. That is beautiful.

God's love has transformed us. In the movie "My Fair Lady" Eliza Doolittle is transformed. She begins as a common guttersnipe. Her accent is a butchering of the gift of language, slovenly and artless. Her attire is rags. Her manners are an affront to human dignity. And a gifted but selfish brute transforms her. Henry Higgins is no type of Christ but he transforms Eliza so that she truly resembles a royal vision, a regal and compelling figure. That is you. Transformed by the Love of Christ – washed in His blood you have a royal vestment, pure as the light that flowed from His person at the Transfiguration. A new heart beats in your breast (Ezekiel 36:26), a heart that looks for the well-being of others (Philippians 2:4), a heart that is eager to serve the least as you have been served (John 13:13-16). You have been transformed. By love you have been transformed – Christ's love. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Is it not your desire to have no other gods? Where do you think that comes from? Christ's love is alive in you – that's where it comes from. It is because you fear and love God that you do a whole host of things. Christ is working in you, through you, to do what pleases His Father (Philippians 2:13). That theological reality is being lived out in your very real life. It is beautiful in our Father's eyes. It is intrinsically beautiful, eternally beautiful, objectively beautiful.

When a Christian sacrifices himself/herself for the benefit of someone else we see Christ in action, His love at work in this world. When Christlike humility manifests itself in someone we see and we are touched by it, we are touched by it because it is beautiful, we are touched by it because it is Christ in our midst, working through lowly sinners to demonstrate that His love transforms us, makes us like Him. I love seeing Him, in you. It is beautiful and inspiring. Look for Him in fathers who work to provide for their families, who defend them, and lead them in the faith. Look for Him in mothers, who nurture their families in love, who feed and nurse them.

Look for Him in all those who serve the common good – in the police and firemen, in those who use the medical arts, in those who teach in our schools and those who uphold justice. Look for Him in your pastor who feeds you the bread of life, who shepherds you and brings you His Word.

He has not left us as orphans. He is certainly with us in this hour, with us in this crisis. You know that He is with us. He said that we would know and we do. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20). Throughout this land, Christians are eager to be back in church. We are fortunate to have this magnificent courtyard. We are here because Christ’s love compels us. That love is the most beautiful thing on this earth. It is in full view this morning. He is the risen King who lavishes His tomb-shattering life on those He loves. He said: “Because I live, you also will live.” No form of death can undo Easter. No virus, no cancer, no disease can take away what Christ has given. Believe it. There is nothing more beautiful on this earth than Christ’s church.