

2 May, 2010; Easter 5C
Acts 11:1-18; Ps 148
Rev 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

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In today's culture, there are few more sterile environments than an airport hotel. Even if the hotel is a nice one, it is a place nobody really wants to be. People come, not to be in it, but in order to be well-placed to leave. There is no community there, no town gathered around it. People do not go there to meet friends or to make them, but to be able to see other people, elsewhere. The whole ethos is one of "just passing through." It is, in fact, an apt metaphor for hell: not hell as a place of suffering and torment, but as a place of anonymity, indifference, and lack of love.

C.S. Lewis captures this sense brilliantly in his novel *The Great Divorce*, which depicts Hell as a gray city, largely empty, as if a much larger population had once lived there, and had departed. He asks someone how this has come to be, and is told "The trouble is that they're so quarrelsome. As soon as anyone arrives he settles in some street. Before he's been there twenty-four hours he quarrels with his neighbour." And so people are constantly moving away from one another, putting greater and greater distances between themselves and the people they are not willing to try to love. The city constantly expands as people choose lives of isolation, building larger and larger houses on larger and larger estates, all to increase the certainty that nobody will ever drive through the gates and knock on their door. It is a place where people invest only in themselves; isolation, anonymity, and emptiness rule the unending dusk.

How different – how different! -- is the heavenly city described in the Revelation to St. John! Here, care is taken to win one another's hearts: the city is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev 21: 2) Just as the first sight of a bride on her wedding-day always makes us catch our breath, so transformed is she in beauty, joy, and love, just so God has made this city exceed itself; it is an offering of beauty, grace, gentleness, and love: an offering for us. And this city is, above all, a place of deep intimacy -- listen again to the words St. John hears coming from the throne of God: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." (Rev 21:3) *God will be with them. God will dwell with them.* This is a return to the intimacy of Eden, where God went walking in the garden at the eve of the day, walking and talking with his beloved people. It is a return to the intimacy of the Incarnation, when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) The image is one, not of power, but of homeliness: at the end of all things, our final destiny is a dwelling-place with God and with one another, friends gathered around a fire under the stars, telling the stories of their joy in one another.

That vision is crucial, because only by keeping it firmly in mind can we prepare ourselves to arrive there. Indeed, today's readings issue a call to commitment: God's commitment to us, and our commitment to one another. Indeed, God's love always precedes our own and makes it possible. St. John writes, "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." (I John 4:11) Knowing that even the people we loathe are people for whom Christ was willing to die on a cross confers dignity on our enemies. Seeing one another through the eyes of God's saving grace allows us to perceive and acknowledge that dignity even when our own hearts are reluctant to grant it. When St. Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified," he is not being morbid. (I Cor 2:2) Rather, he is embracing the stranger by rooting himself in the ground of our hope. To see Christ crucified in each new person is to focus, not on the sorrow and pettiness and degradation of our souls, but on the living presence of God working to raise each one of us to new life.

That presence was there in power when Peter preached among the Gentiles. Notice what he says: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will

be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11: 15:-17) It’s not clear what Paul means when he says that “the Holy Spirit fell on them,” although it’s clear that he is referring to some striking, observable manifestation of God’s presence. The reference to what had happened to the first disciples suggests that he is alluding to Pentecost, and that the gentiles had received the Spirit in tongues, or perhaps in fire. These are nervous-making words to many Episcopalians. We prefer to think of the Spirit of compassion, kindness, mutual love, forgiveness, or healing -- signs of the Spirit’s abiding presence in our lives, rooting and grounding us in love. But here, at the start of the church’s expansion to include all people, St. Paul testifies to the saving power of God. He says, in effect, “The Spirit prepared all this by a vision; the Spirit told these people to send for me and to hear my words; the Spirit told me to go with them; and the Spirit fell on them -- and I could see it!” God’s love preceded Paul’s, and opened the way for these Gentiles to be loved by the people of God.

These are fancy words, extraordinary claims, but they open a terrain of possibility which we inhabit every day. When we move to a new place, when we join a new church, when we meet new people or travel in a foreign culture, what are we doing but following the promptings of God in our hearts, looking for traces of goodness, holiness, and grace in the people among whom we move, and opening our hearts in return when we find it there. We look for the signs of God in one another, and that frees us to love.

For many decades, Christ Church has had a sign of that love in Frank DeMatteis, whom we will lay to rest this week. He has served this congregation for many years as a vestrymember, warden, and mentoring spirit. Whether it was repairing a rectory kitchen, struggling with financial priorities for the parish, welcoming a new rector, or lovingly carving a light-weight wooden cross so that our youngest members could lead us in procession, Frank gave himself to this place and this community without reservation. From small acts to difficult decisions about our leadership, Frank gave us the fruits of his love and faithfulness, and we are the richer for it.

The novelist Madeleine L’Engle writes us a parable about a young child seeking to grow up. All his life, he has been free of care, able to go where he wills, to do what he likes, and to think primarily of himself. But now, as he grows, he is called upon to Deepen, to send down roots and grow in place and do what he can to nurture the life of the world around him. As he struggles with the temptation not to do it, to live a self-centered life of fleeting pleasure, to take rather than to give, to exhaust the resources of the world around him, an ancient one from his tribe speaks into his heart: “It is only when we are fully rooted that we are able to move.” *It is only when we are fully rooted that we are able to move.* “Now that I am rooted, I am no longer limited by motion. Now I may move anywhere in the universe...I share in the joy -- and in the grief...We...must have our part in the rhythm of [creation], or we cannot be.”¹

We must deepen, or we cannot be. That is the message of God’s love for us, the beating heart of our love for one another. When we avoid one another, center our lives in our selves, we choke the life, not only in others, but also in ourselves. When we invest in one another, give ourselves to one another and nurture the life of our communities, we find that we receive thirty and sixty and a hundred-fold. Christ calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but, in the doing, we realize that we love ourselves in learning to love our neighbors. It is our heart which grows, our lives which deepen, our thirst which is quenched, our joy which comes to have no end. For God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, and all this world and the next is formed in his image, world without end. And so are we. Amen.

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, *A Wind in the Door*, p.190.