

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 5, 2024 – The Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 15:9-17; 1 John 5:1-6
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

I have interrupted the usual flow of our service so that I can say a few words about the hymn we are about to sing. As a matter of information, the hymn before the Gospel usually refers to either the lessons that precede it or, more usually, the Gospel lesson we are about to hear. Today the hymn refers to both.

“Lord, I want to be a Christian” is a very simple song. The tune is simple and repetitive, as are the words. It is a Negro spiritual that has become familiar to children and adults in many Christian churches.

Some of you have occasionally asked me to speak about something relevant to your lives, as you live them day by day. I hope that's what I am about to do. “Lord, I want to be a Christian” is a good song to sing as you go about the chores of your day or take a walk or prepare to spend time in prayer. In that sense you might make it relevant to your life.

But there's a much more important point to make about our spiritual growth. Approached in the right spirit, this is a song that can do what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews said about “the word of God, [which] is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

This spiritual has that power if we sing it with full intentionality. “Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.” As we sing those words, we are saying that with the freedom of will that God has given us we choose to follow Jesus in our hearts. Remember, the “heart” signifies more than feelings. “Heart” also means our minds and our intentions, all that is most important about us as human beings. We are singing simple words that mean our full commitment to the way of Jesus.

How about the next verse? “Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.” We can easily sail through this verse if we only think in a general way about being a warm, loving person or if we only think of how well we already love the people we love. But what if we recall the moments when we don't feel at all warm and loving? What if we think of someone we do love very much – a spouse or partner, a child or grandchild, or a dear friend – but our love is being stretched to do something we would rather not do or say something we would rather not say? Yes, we do fail to be loving in these ways, but it's not too difficult to tell the Lord that we want to be more loving in these ways.

But what happens if we think of someone who has wronged us or someone who represents everything we dislike about human beings? What if we also think of the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-45). Let’s be honest. We all have people we would rather not love, perhaps we have people we wouldn’t want to stop hating. Do we honestly want to be more loving in our hearts toward her or him? How is the Lord calling us to be more loving, not generally but specifically, in the particulars of our lives?

The last verse we will sing is “Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.” Now surely that should give us pause! Think of Jesus and his ministry of self-giving love. Think of his teaching, the teaching we hear each week and will hear in a few minutes. Think of his saying to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Do we honestly want to be like Jesus? I think most of us do, again in a general way. But is Jesus calling us to something that we find difficult? Is his command to love more than we want to obey sometimes? I know that Jesus often calls me to love more than I am willing or able to love. How about you?

Perhaps in all honesty we have some reservations about making the commitments expressed in this song. Maybe what is closer to the truth is “Lord, I want to want to be a Christian. Lord, I want to want to be more loving. Lord, I want to want to be like Jesus.” Spiritually mature Christians have said that is enough. In fact, that may be the kind of humility of spirit that God wants us to have. What is important is that we grow in the direction of loving more rather than less. Step by step we may move forward on the path of love. Day by day, choice by choice, love may reach ever greater depths in our hearts.

Now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, let us sing this spiritual with as much commitment as we can make and with our hearts fixed on the Lord of Love. Amen.

Homily after the Gospel

If you are in my age cohort – or perhaps if you are older or younger – you probably know the very popular and talented singer, guitarist, and songwriter, Bonnie Raitt. As I was thinking about today’s lessons, one of her songs kept coming to mind – “Are you ready for the thing called love?” I’m confident that when she wrote this song, she wasn’t focused on the Holy Spirit! But two lines of the lyrics do relate to our lessons.

In the refrain: “Are you ready for the thing called love? Don’t come from me and you, it comes from up above.” Isn’t that what we affirm when in Eucharistic Prayer B we thank God for “the goodness and love made known to us in creation”? Human love is a gift from God. We receive the gift, freely given, and we love in return. We love God who has given the gift, and we love the human beings we are blessed to love. As Christians, we regard this capacity for love as a feature of our being made in the image of God.

Then a line that surprised me when I recently read the lyrics: “We can live in fear or act out of hope.” Of course, this may apply to the romantic love the song is about. After a bad relationship experience, we can give up on all relationships or try again with hope for a better outcome.

But what if we apply the line to our lives of faith as we live them in our world today. We don’t need to rehearse the list of situations that might frighten us into paralysis or despair. The current terrifying situations are unique to our day. But if you read spiritual writers from the 20th century or from many centuries before, you hear a common theme – how might a Christian live amid the horrors in the world. The horrors of each age are different from ours, but there are always horrors. So, how might we, as Christians, live amid today’s horrors? One answer may be this: act out of hope. Think of the power of those few words. Act – do something to alleviate suffering, do something to show compassion and love, in the words of the Prayer Book, do something to show forth our praise of God “not only with our lips, but in our lives.”

And let that action come from hope. Our hope is in God. Our hope is in God’s love and goodness. Our hope is in God’s power. Our hope is in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this Easter season and always, may we be grounded in hope and filled with God’s love, and may we bear the fruit of love that Jesus has appointed us to bear, for the welfare of the world. Amen.