



Sermon for the Opening Eucharist of the 122nd Synod of the Diocese of New Westminster

Friday May 12, 2023

The Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Acts 15: 22-31; John 15: 12-17

We are still in the season of Easter. I know that most of you are well aware of this, but I just wanted to name it. You see most of the world has moved on from Easter. The celebration of Spring is over, the chocolate eggs are nothing, but the left-over foil and the lilies are looking a little unkempt. The world has moved on.

But here in the Church the season of Easter is still in full swing. The story of the resurrection is still central to our liturgy, and we are still with Mary Magdalene staring into what is not just an empty tomb... but a tomb that is calling us to new life. A tomb that is showering us with grace and the love of God. A tomb where we meet the risen Jesus Christ and discover compassion, forgiveness, and a calling to live into the new life. It is a transforming encounter, and we are not finished experiencing it. Just a little longer we say.

And rightly so because Easter changes everything. Everything. And we are Easter people. We are not people only focused on the cross, we are focused on the empty cross and the risen Christ. The risen Christ who came to those first followers and broke bread with them to reveal his presence, whose first words to them were "Peace be with you," who invited them to continue to follow, for Jesus would be with them until the end of the ages. And all of this continues to be true in our churches even today.

But we are called to be more than simply people who remember our history. We are called to live into the new life offered to us through Jesus. We are called to be changed, renewed, receivers of the grace of God and living in response that indeed Easter changes everything.

And I think this means asking, “So what is God calling us to do now?” Part of the purpose of this Synod is to examine this very question. As we look at priorities, as we look at the housing affordability and the homeless crisis in this area, as the Church of 2023, what is God calling us to be and do?

Back on January 30, 2020, more than 3 years ago now, the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was a health emergency in the world. Seems obvious now but at the time many of us wondered what the future might hold. About a week ago COVID-19 was deemed to no longer be a health emergency. While we still live in a pandemic there has been a downgrade, if you will, so that it is no longer seen as the emergency it was back in 2020. The reality is that in the Church around the world and here in our diocese we have been severely tested and challenged by the pandemic. Three years is a long time and we have seen the impact. Attendance has been affected, financial giving has been affected, volunteerism (or the stewardship of our time and talents has been affected), outreach has been affected, the connection of children and youth to our churches has been affected, our confidence in where God is calling us to go have been affected. We have been forced to set a restart button and it has raised a number of questions. What does the future hold? What should the Church be responding to in the world of 2023? What is the Holy Spirit urging, inviting, and nudging us to be doing? What has this pandemic taught us? What is society as a whole seeking as a result of living in this time? “What now?” we may very well be asking. What now for us who are Easter people.

The gospel passage for this day speaks to this very thing. We heard part of Jesus’ farewell discourse to his closest followers. He was speaking to them about what was most central and what they were being called to live into when he would no longer be physically with them. He was encouraging them to be the Church and respond to their faith by living out the gospel in actions and words.

We heard: “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father, the Creator, will give you whatever you ask in my name.” Into all our searching and angst and worries and fears in this time of the lingering pandemic we heard these words encouraging them to not simply sit still but to live into being the Body of Christ.... Aware that they were chosen, he urged them to bear fruit, fruit that speaks about what is most important in life. And he said these words to them after he had already said: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Last summer, Archbishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church offered these words in response. He said: “The problem is there’s a gap between Jesus and his followers... And it’s that gap that’s the problem. It’s that gap that undermines our efforts to commend this Jesus and his way of love to a wider culture, to those who don’t have a religious background. It’s that gap, that gap between this Jesus, who is attractive, and his followers, some of whom often are not. But there’s hope because Jesus told us how to close the gap.

In John's Gospel... (Jesus) tells them and tells us how to close the gap. "I give you a new commandment." I want you to hear that word commandment. "I give you a new commandment." Not a new idea, not a new option, not a new possibility. I give you something of the caliber of what Moses did coming down Mount Sinai with two tablets in his hand. I'm giving you the same thing, the same way, the same gravity. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." The same way God loves you, love each other, with that same love. "For by this," and he adds this, "by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another."

Archbishop Curry said, "Walking the way of unselfish, sacrificial love as Jesus taught us, closes the gap. Following the way of this Jesus, until his footprints and our footprints become indistinguishable, begins to close the gap. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."¹

We are in the Easter Season where we are asked how we live into being Easter people. How are we different because of that empty tomb? How do we live into being followers of this Jesus who calls us to love one another as he loves us? How are we called to be people changed, renewed and given new focus by the gospel of love so that it affects how we view the world and how we view one another?

This Synod will be asking all of us to think about what is God calling us to do as the Church in 2023. What are our priorities? What is the Holy Spirit of wind and fire prodding us to be and do? What does it mean to love one another as Christ loves us?

This is the perfect time to consider the direction God is calling us... here ... now... as a diocese and as individual followers of Jesus... the perfect time to ask what God is calling us to be and to do.

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"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." John 10:10b

¹ From Archbishop Michael Curry's sermon to General Convention July 8, 2022