

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Year B

RCL



Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

John 15:9-17

The Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Psalm 98 Page 727 BCP

Cantate Domino

1 Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things.

2 With his right hand and his holy arm has he won for himself the victory.

3 The LORD has made known his victory; his righteousness has he openly shown in the sight of the nations.

4 He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

5 Shout with joy to the LORD, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.

6 Sing to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the voice of song.

7 With trumpets and the sound of the horn shout with joy before the King, the LORD.

8 Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, the

lands and those who dwell therein.

9 Let the rivers clap their hands, and let the hills ring out with joy before the LORD, when he comes to judge the earth.

10 In righteousness shall he judge the world and the peoples with equity.

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

SERMON

It's Mother's Day. We think of Mother's Day as the day each year when we honor mothers. It is nothing of the sort! If you're smart, EVERY day is the day we honor our mothers for is it not written, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy?" Mother's Day is the day each year when we remind the rest of us blockheads where we would be without our mothers in the hopes of instilling a bit of gratitude in us.

When I ask where would we be without our mothers I don't mean the obvious answer, "Without your mother you wouldn't be here at all." I mean the smaller things that permit us to live. Little things like providing a home, feeding us, comforting us when we're overwhelmed, granting us courage and a sense of self-worth, catching us when we fall. You know — The little things that mom does which add up to the production of a

functioning us.

My one and only visit to Chicago happened many, many years ago, in the evening, in the middle of a driving rain. I had driven a friend to a town nearby, and made the decision to loop through Chicago to see what it looked like. When I got off the freeway, I dropped down into the downtown. I have no idea where I was, but the buildings were huge. Even the entrances of the buildings seemed two or three stories high, and overhead ran this enormous train system. The traffic went at a great pace, and I felt very small and lost. It seemed that Chicago was built for people much taller than I – that its scale was super-human. I was a little thing in a great place, and I was frightened. I felt that Chicago could swallow me up, and no one would be the wiser for my going.

Of course, Chicago didn't swallow me up. I found

my way back to the freeway and put Chicago behind me, but it made me think, as I recall the incident, what it would be like to face the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, even in a small place like Ashland, without the resources I gained from my mother. Those resources came from the little things my mother did for me – tiny drops of encouragement deposited one after the other until they built the reserves of strength an adult needs to do adult things.

I suppose that what I'm saying is that it is the nurturing that mothers lavish upon their children that supports and comforts them throughout life. The idea of lavishing is the one we need to focus on. Selma Hayek, the actress, visited Sierra Leone not long ago. During the trip, she encountered a very hungry African baby whose mother had stopped breastfeeding. Ms. Hayek, herself a new mother, breastfed the baby, touching off

an enormously unnecessary storm of indignation.

Well, that's what mothers do. A mother sees a child in need or danger and will respond to that child without pausing to do the arithmetic about whether or not the child is deserving of her help or whether or not some armchair quarterback is going to later get his knickers in a twist over it. This is hard-wired into mamas whether they have children of their own or not. Self-denying care for others is as inescapable for moms as a heart-beat.

So, let's look at the idea of lavish love for a minute. Suppose a mother is walking by a gate in a strange part of town. Suddenly, a toddler slips the latch on a gate and darts toward a busy roadway. Now, we know what will happen. The mother will instantly rush to the child, catch him or her and return them to the safety of the yard before harm can occur. That's what mothers do.

Nothing remarkable about that. A father would do the same.

Of course, if you pause to think about what the child did, it is possible to imagine another line of reasoning. What the toddler has done is a thoroughly indefensible, self-destructive thing. If we rescue the toddler from his mistake, aren't we just encouraging that sort of behavior? How will the child ever learn unless he has an opportunity to experience the bad consequences of indefensible, self-destructive actions, like being maimed by being run over by a bus? If we run and save him, we're just enabling further latch-slipping and darting behavior, and there will be no end to it.

That's the line of reasoning that we apply to older children, isn't it? There comes an age when we feel comfortable saying, "If I help this struggling person, I'm just encouraging him or her to continue in indefen-

sible self-destructive activities. He's got to sink or swim on his own."

My question is: how old does a child have to be before we're comfortable throwing him under the bus, as it were? And does he or she get a few mulligans before we do that? Do we throw them under the bus on the first offense, or the second ... I need some help here. Do we just look to the child's age, or can we factor in our degree of frustration with the child?

Just think back, to yourself, about that thing you did when you were seventeen. You know very well what I'm talking about. THAT thing. Don't go looking all innocent at me. What if your mother threw up her hands when she found out about it and kicked you out of the house, telling you you could never come back because that would just be encouraging more of you-know-what. What if this was the hundredth time that toddler had

slipped the latch and his mother had had become so frustrated that she threw her hands up and decided that what will be will be? Would that ever happen, do you think?

I suppose we could say that we will stop chasing after a child headed for a collision with a bus when they are old enough to know better, when they are past the age of accountability. The Jews have such a concept – that of Bar Mitzvah, or son of the law. A boy becomes accountable to the law at thirteen. That would be just fine if everybody grew up at the same rate, but we already know that when you did you-know-what you were older than thirteen. So how do we tell when an individual is old enough to know better if everyone learns at a different pace?

This sort of question really bedeviled me in my earlier life. After I got over being prideful about being the

Commonwealth's Attorney for Kentucky's 32nd Judicial Circuit and stopped hearing theme music in my head every time I walked into the office, I started looking at the people I was dealing with. People who aren't involved with the criminal justice system often think of criminals as guys with masks and stripey shirts like "Black Bart" and his boys in "A Christmas Story", but the truth is much different. We used to say "You can't tell the defendants from the victims without a program." I came to realize that the people whose lives I was wrecking were just, at bottom, people. Christ told me to love my neighbor. These neighbors were damaged and often hurt. My biggest complaint when I was a prosecutor was that the police would bring me these delicate watches which had gone wrong, unquestionably children of God, and the law gave me only jack hammers to work on them with. I could turn them loose with a stern lecture or I could

convict them, and leave them with a felony record. Forget jail. Jail is temporary. A felony record is forever.

A felony record means that you are not going to get a job, particularly in economic times like these, so you won't have money, and you can't get government housing so you will have to bunk in with others of like experience. What do you imagine happens in such an environment? I sat in my office dealing out misery and though I saw these children running right at a moving bus, I was powerless to intervene.

The response to my confession of frustration often was, "You're not doing anything to them. They did it to themselves." The same could be said of the toddler who slipped the latch on the gate.

"But," sputtered my critics, "The difference is that they're old enough to know better!"

Yes, they are old enough to know better, but that

begs the question. The real question is do they know better? And do they have access to the reserves of strength and love granted by a mother throughout their childhood to do better?

Sadly, sometimes the answer is “No.” Sadly, sometimes the people I threw under the bus arrived at my desk because there was no where else for them to go.

A few years ago, I heard that the case load of West Virginia’s social workers, divided by the number of social workers employed, indicated that each social worker could devote something like 30 minutes each month to each individual case. These are children we’re talking about, and adults who cannot care for themselves.

The Public Defender’s Office here tells me that they handle about 3,500 cases a year. They have 8 lawyers to do it with. This caseload represents people who have appeared in court with the expectation that the legal sys-

tem which we hold up to the world as representing civilized justice would treat them fairly and in accord with its own rules.

If any of the people I dealt with were about to step in front of a bus, who here would stand idly by and watch it? But when we institutionalize our handling of them, as we have done, we do stand idly by.

I mentioned the idea of lavishing love by moms who don't do arithmetic about who deserves their love. Her kids or other people's kids, moms protect them. God has claimed us as His children. Why do we imagine God would feel differently than a mom? Why do we imagine that God would mourn any less when one of His children takes a wrong path?

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's

commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

It sounds to me as if Jesus is telling us who are called to the name Christian that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves because the Father first loved us, and He knows what an unreliable, clanking piece of machinery we walk around in trying to do His will and bring His love to His creation. If He lavishes love on us, even when we slip the latch and run for the traffic, the least we can do is to love His children in the same way. I think we should lavish love on God's children just as mothers do.

Mother's love doesn't involve itself with arithmetic about who deserves to be saved from the bus. The love of a mother for all children gives us a model of God's love for us, even when we do self-destructive things to

ourselves. Unfortunately, the unreliable, clanking machinery of the flesh that we walk around in sometimes leads us to believe that we are better at deciding who deserves help than we really are. I think we'd do better toward God and our neighbor if we would listen to what mama said, do what Jesus commands us, and leave the judging of His children up to him. He's better qualified.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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