

May 6, 2018
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

Though I understand myself as an introvert, I enjoy human exchange, of which the last two or three weeks have been chock full. That's probably due to a coalescence of factors: extra time; extra opportunity; extra sunshine.

Here's the most recent example. As I mentioned last week, my office-away-from-the-office is Books & Co., also home of Legal Grounds, just up Whitney Avenue. I went there on Thursday afternoon, after losing my real-office struggle with Spring Fever-related distractibility. I simply could not get myself to finish today's service bulletin, so that Julie could print it by the end of the day.

As you can tell by the paper in your hands, the bulletin got done. But it still took more than two hours to complete my 30-minute task. There were many factors in that delay; it is entirely possible that Satan today communicates primarily via email. In fact, distraction is available in any office, including Books & Co. And on Thursday the main distraction came personified as a 21-year-old college student. I got my coffee, sat down near him, and simply *had* to mention that I was there to focus on finishing some time-sensitive work. It may seem silly to sit down and immediately start talking on order to explain to him why I wasn't going to talk to him. But, *bless your heart*, I'm from the South, where, even subconsciously, one avoids the appearance of unfriendliness.

For the *length* of my delay, I could blame the college student; after all, he's the one who asked what I was working on. But what I should do is hope that he didn't regret opening his mouth. You see, he is completely un-churched, and I am, as you know, what some might describe as over-churched.

Our conversation stopped and started, twisting this way and that. He asked me more questions, and I asked some of him. Your friend Church Geek will answer one of his questions in Wednesday's Enews. We discussed his perception of Christians and Christianity, gleaned mostly from the public discourse, and my description of something much different.

The conversation I had with that undergraduate was not so different from conversations I've had with many of you over the last few weeks. And those conversations were not so different from the ones we shared in the Inquirers Group over the last few months. Maybe it all stems from the same coalescence of factors: extra time; extra opportunity; extra sunshine. But I think it's about more than that. I think a stirring is happening, mysteriously, underground, in us and all around us. It's a stirring that begs, and sometimes demands, time, opportunity, and energy—not just mine, but yours—as people who ask and as people who answer.

Our readings for this year's Easter season have been taken almost solely from Acts, 1 John, and John. The readings appointed for today continue that pattern. We've been hearing a lot about what it means to follow Jesus, especially in the wake of his death and resurrection. We've been hearing a lot about love.

Last week and this, we've also several times heard the word *abide*. To get technical on you, *abide* is the English translation of the Greek word μένω (*menō*). That word shows up a few times in each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, always literally, in reference to time spent in a physical place, something like, "Hey, why don't you stay the night at my house," or "This year I'm heading up to Maine for summer school."

In that sense, μένω or *abide* is used to describe a place and time certain. It shows up in John that way as well, But John also uses it in another, more John-ish way. His first use is in Chapter 1, when he portrays the Holy Spirit as descending upon and abiding in Jesus. As Jesus approaches the cross, he talks to his disciples about mutuality in abiding, approaching the way we describe the Holy Trinity as a "mutual indwelling"; as we heard last week, "Abide in me as I abide in you."¹ As we might summarize this week, Abide in God's love, so that you may love one another, so that your joy may be complete.

Jesus uses this word *abide* literally, but also metaphorically and metaphysically. One can hear it as an *invitation*, and also as an *observation*—as a fact—something that is both within and beyond place and time. Imagine that God has taken up permanent residence in you. Imagine that you have taken up permanent residence in God. Imagine that being true for every person here, and for every person you will ever meet. Now imagine how that might lead you to perfect love and to perfect joy. Imagine that perfect love and perfect joy existing right here, right now, as well as beyond the bounds of space and time.

Spring has sprung, and we are emerging from the warm soil. Following the daffodils, about in time with the tulips, we are uncurling our necks, pushing our heads through the crust, and peeking around.

The arborist knows from experience that the literally pruned tree bears the most fruit. Last week we heard Matt wonderfully explicate the Bible's turning of that literal truth into metaphorical truth. We Episcopalians generally favor of Biblical metaphor, while insisting on the Bible's real truth. Perhaps that is an invitation to create the metaphor that speaks to us.

And so, here's one. Jakki and I moved into our home in Spring Glen just over two years ago. Over that time, the backyard beds have become wildly overgrown. Because we sort of like them that way, we have allowed our focus to remain elsewhere. As a result, the hostas and ferns have enjoyed aggressive abandon. Knowing that another year will spell disaster, Jakki has launched an aggressive counter-effort, taking shovel to mound, separating clumps of barely-exposed stems, and adopting out the offspring using neighborhood "curb alerts" on Facebook. In effect, she has played midwife to what could be dozens of new hosta and fern communities.

I occupy a very privileged position among you, and I don't mean because you trust me to stand up here. Really, standing up here is only emblematic of a much greater privilege and trust. It starts with the fact that I'm just about the only person here who knows just about every person here. It continues with opportunities that I have, again and again, to engage with you here and with people out there on your behalf, in ways that are both surprising and meaningful—for me, hopefully for you, and hopefully for the world.

That struck me again on Friday night at the potluck, as I introduced people with connections and commonalities, and as I participated in our Feast of Fools evening prayer. It was the 4th of May, a.k.a. Star Wars Day, as in, "May the 4th be with you." This fact had escaped me but not, of course, the youth who did the planning. In the appropriate spirit of liturgical satire, our service included a reading from *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, offered with a respectable impression of Yoda. Remember, satire is more complex than simple humor. This was made clear by the special creed that one youth took the opportunity to write. It goes this way:

We believe in St. Thomas's Church
Provider of peace, support, love, and sanctuary.
We believe in the St. Thomas's youth groups,
agents of fun and chaos.
We believe in music and games; in potlucks and pizza parties;
in movie nights and standing for a cause.
We believe in each other and in the force that bonds us.
One church, one youth group, one force uniting us all.
May the force be with us.

I occupy a very privileged position among you, because you trust me to be a party to so much love. What I know is from experience is that the only to really be a priest is to give and accept love. That includes growing in my ability to do so, as well as letting myself be vulnerable to its unpredictable results. In light of that, I encourage you to consider the gifts and demands of your own priesthood. Invitation and observation: abide in God's love, so that you may love one another, so that your joy may be complete.

In the days to come, notice the buds on the branches and the shoots from the soil, tenderly reaching toward life. Notice them literally and metaphorically; notice how they make you feel about things within and beyond yourself. God abides there, with love, and joy.

Notes

¹ John 15:4, NRSV.