

May 12, 2024, Ascension Sunday

Pastor Laurie Lynn Newman

John 17:6-19 and Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

Did you know that are recently discovered historical documents , with quotes from mothers of famous people? (As they were caught, unaware?)

--Achille's mother: "Stop imagining things. There's nothing wrong with your heel!"

--Alexander the Great's mother said: "How many times do I have to tell you—you can't have everything you want in this world!"

--Franz Schubert's mother: "Take my advice, son. Never start anything you can't finish."

--Sigmund Freud's mother: "Stop pestering me! I've told you a hundred times-- the stork brought you!"

Just a little gratuitous Mother's Day humor. But on the more serious side, there is the poem by Kathleen Norris, that addresses a crucial issue of parenting. It's actually an issue for every single one of us who has in some way, has left a parent or parents, to be ourselves. It is the lesson of letting go. Norris captures it in her poem written for Ascension Sunday, today.

*Ascension Poem*, by Kathleen Norris

It wasn't just wind, chasing  
thin gunmetal clouds  
across the loud sky;  
it wasn't the feeling that one might ascend  
on that excited air,  
rising like a trumpet note.

And it wasn't just my sister's water breaking,  
her crying out,  
the downward draw of blood and bone...

It was all of that,  
the mud and new grass  
pushing up through melting snow,  
the lilac in bud  
by my front door, bent low  
by last week's ice storm.

Now the new mother, that leaky vessel,  
begins to nurse her child,  
beginning the long good-bye.

"Beginning the long goodbye. . ." Perhaps this summarizes of the meaning of Ascension. Though our hymns and liturgy sometimes suggest, a theology of Jesus' leaving the soil of planet earth, to reside with the Divine in a skyward dome of Heaven. But that theology is based on a cosmology that is at odds with what we now know of the universe. This isn't "astronaut Jesus" day. This is a time to reflect that Jesus, like each one of us, comes from God, and returns to God. And, in Jesus' physical departure from loved ones, it speaks to us of our own, and all human experience. That's why the reading from Acts, about the selection of new leadership for the early church helps to shape significance of this Sunday. God's love and presence persists, always—but there are sometimes goodbyes, and gaps that cause us to wonder—is

God still with us? When we journey into unknown experiences and relationships, is Christ still with us? What do we do when our loved ones are no longer physically with us?

There will always be goodbyes in our lives, and we can trust that in those gaps, God's love persists. It's not just the parent/child relationships where we experience goodbye and letting go. It happens throughout life. It happened for you, when Pastor Mark announced his retirement, the many months that he and Donna prepared to leave, the two-month gap before I began as your Interim Pastor, and now, it's a long goodbye again, as I prepare to leave on June 17, to begin a new interim ministry.

No matter how joyful our new "hellos" are; no matter that it's good change; each goodbye invites us to find within ourselves and together, trust. Trust in God's presence. We can notice where the Holy Spirit is moving us, and shaping us into a more nimble and ready community. In the change, we can pay attention to how we are guided to grow and thrive in ways that we can't even imagine, yet.

In today's reading, Johannine church is being assured of being inspired and apostolic. Christ's return to God, and the anxiety produced by change is addressed in this passage from John. The words assured those anxious readers that the Spirit will lead in the continuity of Jesus' love. The church will witness to Christ, be reminded of Jesus, and of God's love. That is a message for us today, also. In choosing your next, settled pastor—all this work we've done of listening for God's presence in the Horizon conversations, in the choosing of the Call Committee, and their many hours of building relationships; in all that you've given of selves in love and resources—we can be assured of the Spirit leading, deepening God's love and relationship, in the transitions.

One more thing about the passage from John 17, from a prayer that Jesus prayed, before his crucifixion. As we read it, we are overhearing what Jesus is saying to God in behalf of his followers. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine. . ." I'm going to close this sermon in a similar way: as my prayer to God on behalf of you all.

God of new life,

This is a new experience for me, next month, saying goodbye after short time--fourteen and a half months at St. Andrew. This congregation and I have traveled some ups and downs on the interim journey. I pray that this beloved community continues to pursue what it means to be a welcoming, reconciling people in challenging, changing, times.

In the wake of COVID, we got into new patterns. For various reasons, some have stepped away. Some people who were newer to the congregation stepped up to lead, and some people who had been around a long time, stepped up again to lead. . For all of those, gracious God, grant new energy and vitality in growth and ministry along with the new pastor.

God of peace, help this congregation of yours continue to serve in ways that stretch beyond what is familiar, and traditional, in order to be a permeable community, welcoming in all who seek a new spiritual home. In welcoming the stranger, may they see the face of Christ. May relationships deepen, be safe, and become more and more authentic. Thank you, God, for the brave souls who model this. Let your Spirit move this community more and more into the unknown, with trust in You. When I am no longer here, and they are no longer with me, God of Grace, assure us of Your presence and love. Amen.