



May 17, 2020
Psalm 66: 8-20
Acts 17: 22-31
I Peter 3:13-22
John 14: 15-21

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Hello, this is Michele Sigg. I have been a member at St. John's for many years and I am currently on the vestry.

There is a tall ceramic vase that sits on a bookshelf in my office. (I have included a photo in my transcript.) It is actually a water pot—one of many that I made years ago when I was actively making pottery. At that time, I made a series of large water pots as part of a long reflection on what it meant, as a Christian, to be a vessel in God's service, bearer of the water of life. This particular pot is smaller than the other pots I made. It also has a serious flaw. During the glaze firing, a large chunk broke off, leaving a gash-like shape in the neck of the pot, a break in the glaze that reveals the bare clay beneath. In spite of its defect, I love that pot. But I display the pot with its front—the flawed side—facing the wall. The other day, however, I decided I needed to turn it around so I could see its imperfect side.

The image of my water pot came to mind as I was reading the lectionary texts for Sunday, in particular Psalm 66, verses 18 to 20: "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God listened; for he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me." The passage connects with the petition we make in the prayer of confession "Forgive us our sins, known and unknown." What are my unknown sins? The ones I cherish in my heart? I often worry about the sins that I may not see in my life. The ones so deeply embedded that they have become part of the landscape of my life.

A lesson I gleaned from John Hare's sermon a few weeks ago comforted me. He said that as we seek to discern the way forward in our lives and do not know what is the right path to choose, if we are longing for Jesus and his kingdom, we cannot really go wrong. That is, if we are motivated first by the love of Jesus in our lives, then he will lead us along a path that will bring blessing to others.

In John 14, Jesus says "if you love me, you will keep my commandments". Then he makes an amazing announcement to his disciples: he promises to send them another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth." This feels like an extraordinary and underrated moment in Christian history: the moment Jesus formally introduces his disciples to the last member of the Godhead—the one who will take over the role that Jesus has played while he was in the flesh, while he was with them—Emmanuel, God with us. It is thanks to the Holy Spirit that Jesus can say to the disciples "I will not leave you orphaned." What boundless comfort, what healing joy to know that I will never be an orphan because I have been adopted into the family of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But what does Jesus mean when he says, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments"? The disciples were probably asking themselves the same question. I imagine them looking at each other, whispering "Commandments? What commandments? Do you know what he is talking about?" Like students who have fallen asleep in class and realize they missed key content that will be on an upcoming test. They are, possibly, expecting commandments along the lines of those lists of rules the Pharisees liked to compile. (The disciples were dull students, after all). But I imagine Jesus, smirking to himself, as the master teacher that he is, and letting that statement "if you love me, you will keep my commandments" hang in the air, creating a growing tension in the disciples' hearts and minds.

They also must have felt a desperate urgency after the exchange they had just witnessed between Jesus and Peter. In an expression of childlike devotion, Peter had asked Jesus, "Why can't I come with you now? I am ready to die for you." But Jesus corrected him and answered something like this: "Die for me? You are wrong, Peter. Here is the truth, my friend. You do not love me that way yet, Peter. You, my friend, will commit the ultimate sin against love, against me: you will betray me. Tonight you will deny you ever knew me." [pause] I imagine the stunned silence that followed those words, the deep consternation, perhaps even a sense of hopelessness.

Immediately before Peter's declaration in chapter 13, Jesus had told them what his commandment was in v 34: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And in chapter 15, Jesus repeats his commandment, with the deeper meaning that his atoning death adds to it: "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."

To love Jesus and to love like Jesus then is this: To lay down my life for my friends. The friends who know Jesus and those who do not.

This time of social isolation has brought out some of my deeply buried vulnerabilities. Sometimes I feel like St. Anthony fighting demons—little goblin or gargoyle-like creatures with pointy ears, spiked tails, and bat wings. Without the physical presence of my brothers and

sisters, it is easier for me to get discouraged and become too introspective, too focused on my weaknesses and my flaws. Sometimes I sink beneath the waves of discouragement and distraction, instead of keeping my eyes fixed on Jesus through whom I can do all things because he strengthens me.

I can do all things. Through Christ. Who strengthens me. Even walk on water. In the midst of a storm. And what a storm.

It is good for me to look at my flawed water pot. It will help me remember to keep my eyes on the loving face of Jesus who has forgiven all my sins, known and unknown. And if I falter, I can reach out and take his hand amidst the stormy waters. If my heart longs for him and for his kingdom, then I can trust that he will lead me. And I can say with the Psalmist, "Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me."

I will close with a prayer by St. Augustine, slightly adapted:

Late have I love you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I love you: for behold you were within me, and I outside; and I sought you outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and cried to me to break open my deafness: and you sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now I pant for you. I tasted you, and now hunger and thirst for you: you touched me, and I have burned for your peace. Amen.

Lord, touch us also, that we may love as you love and burn for your peace. Amen.