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John 14:23-29 & 5:1-9  
Acts 16:9-15  
Psalm 67  
Rev. 21:10,22-22:5

May 26, 2019  
Sixth Sunday of Easter

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This has been one of those milestone weeks. The kind that every parent dreams of and also dreads. The culmination of years calling out vocabulary words, cheering at swim meets, staying up late waiting for your son or daughter to come home. Years of visits from the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny. First cars, first dates, first breakups. 18 years of it all and then you watch them take their diploma in hand. And you know, as hard as it is, it's also the best feeling you can imagine. Seeing them grow, becoming who they were meant to be, and at the same time crying because you won't get to see them every evening and every morning.

But, you send them on, to the next phase of what life will bring. To learn about this person God has created them to be. We pray for the best, hoping only joy and love and goodness will be their guides.

We teach them how to make good choices, hopefully raise them to be kind and compassionate. We take them to church so that they know God and trust in something greater than themselves. We equip them with the life skills to be happy, productive adults. At least, that's our hope. But we all know that life isn't as kind as we would like for it to be. That's where those skills come in handy. That's where faith serves to guide them. That's where God stands to strengthen them....but will they have the kind of belief that will get them through the difficult times? Will they trust in this God we have so faithfully taught them about?

Clearly, with Hollis' graduation this past Friday, I've had a lot these thoughts on my mind. And what happens quite often when I read scripture, (and maybe you do this as well) is that I often read it and reflect upon it based upon what is going on in my life at the time. We tend to look at the larger lessons scripture has to teach so that we can gain a greater understanding of where God is in our lives at any given moment. This is very true for me this week. I couldn't help but read our texts in light of this idea of our young people moving forward into a new and uncertain journey, and hoping beyond hope that they will look to God for guidance and strength.

I provided one Gospel lesson for you this morning...but there were actually two in the lectionary to choose from. In the first one, from John chapter 14, we read the words...do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. In this text, Jesus is reminding his disciples that God is going to send the Holy Spirit to be with them after he is gone - to guide them and comfort them. It's the kind of guidance that comes from a faithful life - a life that continually turns to God for help. And this kind of faithful life provides a type of security that can't come from the external world. So...love God, follow what Jesus has taught, keep trying and trust in God's love for you.

OK. That sounds simple enough but how often do we truly follow Jesus? How often do we place our lives squarely on God's truths when there are so many other, more enticing things to grab our attention? And in light of graduation...how will our young people navigate the world they are moving into when there are so many things pulling them in opposing directions?

I like the simplicity of John 14...it's a straightforward message of belief but I find that the reality is that we live in a lot of grey areas. Grey areas of what we might get away with, grey areas of rules we could bend, of reinterpretations of Jesus' message that would make our life less complicated and easier to do what we want, when we want. I mean...do we really have to be nice to that person? Do we really have to stand up to injustice and oppression and poverty? Do we really have to be honest and ethical even if it means we don't get that promotion or that grade?

It's easier to answer WWJD if Jesus just did what we preferred. Right? But, Jesus is making a point that yes, you could choose to not follow his word but the result might be a troubled heart and a life weighed down in fear and worry. And this matters to Jesus.

And so, the second Gospel option for today shed some light on this critical commitment we are talking about. Let's look at John Chapter 5. It's the story where Jesus comes upon a man, sitting by a pool of water that has healing capabilities. He has been sick for 38 years, basically his entire lifetime. When Jesus sees him, he asks, "do you want to be made well?" Simple enough question. His question should have an easy answer. But instead of answering Jesus, the man starts to complain. He blames others for not helping him....no one has helped me into this pool that would heal me. They cut me off, they ignore me. The man never takes responsibility for himself. In other words, the fact that he sick is because of other people's lack of care. How often have you heard that or maybe you have said something similar? And I love Jesus' response. Jesus ignores his complaints altogether and says very directly...get up, take your mat and walk. The man finally does as he is told. He finally listens to Jesus' word and he walks.

Two lessons emerge for me from these texts. The first is that following Jesus' word is often difficult. We would rather find excuses, point to all of the reasons why we can't follow, blame others for our shortcomings and failures. Fear and apprehension are often easier than bold trust in God's word. And so we avoid doing what is right.

The second lesson is that at some point, we have to live into our fear, to face our doubts, to say OK God, I am going to give this a shot. And then you have to take that literal leap of faith and place your heart squarely in the hands of God. We have to take responsibility for our journey.

This is the Good News! Jesus doesn't want you to suffer or to struggle on that journey. As much as we may deny God's good gifts, the Holy Spirit will keep pursuing us – that's what John 14 reminds us. We may be like the sick man, unsure of how to claim these gifts of redemption, we may point to all of the reasons we don't want them or don't deserve them. But, I want you to notice something about our second Gospel lesson...the man never asks for healing. Never. Yet,

Jesus gives it anyway. Jesus gives him what he needs even though the man can't claim it on his own. As he struggles with his own sense of responsibility, Jesus says, here...let me help.

So as I send my own son out into the world, I am comforted by the fact that God is going to keep pursuing him. At times, he may be like the man by the pool, unsure of how to take responsibility for his actions, uncertain of how to trust in God, doubting if he can do what life presents to him. But I believe that God will never let him go. God is going to keep asking...what do you need?

My prayer is that Hollis and each of you will trust in that promise. Even if you don't know what to ask for or what you need. Even though you may make mistakes. Even though you may doubt and wrestle until you are exhausted with faith. Sometimes, you just have to open your heart and trust that God is giving you just what you need to guide you through this life, when you can't quite navigate it on your own.

It reminds me of one of my favorite verses from Romans...

*Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. —Romans 5.3-5*

God's love is poured out for you. Stand up and walk. Amen.