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St. James', Mt. Airy  
5/8/16

Easter 7C  
Acts 16:16-34  
Psalm 97  
Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21  
John 14:23-29

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.**

**Amen.**

Last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension – the day when we remember the last time the resurrected Jesus gathered with his friends before being lifted up to heaven before their very eyes.

Next Sunday is Pentecost – the day when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, appearing like the rush of a violent wind and lighting on the apostles as tongues of flame.

Today, and for a few days longer, we stand in the season of Easter – but perhaps in that landscape of liminality where you can smell change in the air.

So maybe it's fitting that today's Gospel reading from John is the conclusion of Jesus' farewell discourse to the disciples, given gathered around a table, the night before his Passion – why not mix it up and add a little Lent in there too?

But Jesus' message from that night is a timeless one, if written in what can seem to be a convoluted manner. There's certainly a sense of the tongue twister/brain bender in this passage – I can tell you I spent some time practicing reading it out loud in preparation for proclaiming it today!

And yet once you parse out the stilted language, you find a final hope from Jesus for his followers – both those gathered around him, and all the way down to us today – **belief, oneness**, and the final abiding word: **love**.<sup>1</sup>

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**Belief.** Jesus prayed for those who have believed in him, for those who will believe because of the witness of the disciples, and for the world.

Here in John, belief is more than accepting cognitive information, it is about **transformation**. St. John Chrysostom wrote that the world could come to belief by the observing the transformed lives of the followers of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

I can't help but hear that ubiquitous childhood song *This Little Light of Mine* in response – sing it with me!

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.*

*Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine.*

*Hide it under a bushel, no!, I'm gonna let it shine.*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

And everyone will see it, and everyone will know.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 541.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 543.

That gets us part of the way there, but it doesn't entirely hit the mark. Because the challenge of living faithfully is not only a call to personal goodness, it is a call to *let our lives invite others* to follow Jesus.<sup>3</sup> It misses the mark a bit because it's rooted solely in the individual – and here in this Gospel passage, as so often, Jesus was addressing the **community, about the work of the community.**

It is a both/and – this transformation – and must include both individuals and communities for it to be fully realized.

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***Oeness.*** The unity for which Jesus prayed is founded on reciprocal love, the kind of self-giving love seen in the life of Jesus. This mutual and reciprocal love is the kind of love that is as much about a decision or choice, as it is a feeling. It is the kind of love that can be a commanded<sup>4</sup> – *love one another as I have loved you.*

This oneness can transcend difference, though it does not mean that it always will. We have only to look at the long history of the Christian faith, the repeated fracturing of communion over dogma, belief and power to know this. One theologian aptly described it this way: “A failure to live in unity is usually a failure of reciprocity.”<sup>5</sup>

Our ability to create oneness, then is to love fiercely and freely, giving of our authentic selves to all that we encounter, and in turn to being vulnerable and strong enough to accept such love in return. One might even call that the beloved community.

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 543.

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 542.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 542. [The Rev. Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare]

William Herzog posits that we should actually think of today's Gospel passage as the conclusion of Jesus' "transitional discourse" rather than his "farewell discourse," because it is a hinge in the story, and witnesses to an imminent change.

And so, if belief is about transformation, then oneness is about **transition**. It is about changing ourselves as individuals and changing as a community. It is a series of transitions in how we understand and live out the commandment to love one another – the hope being that we enter ever deeper into unity in Christ.

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**Love.** The end of his discourse; the last word that Jesus gave his friends before the unfolding of the events that would lead to his death. Five times within these six verses Jesus named *love* as the key descriptor of divine relationships.<sup>6</sup> It is the final prayer Jesus had for all those who would follow him.

This is not a sermon for parsing out the various meanings of love. No, here what I want to focus on is the **abiding nature** of love, and how Jesus used it as the illustration of his relationship to the Father, and to us. A love so enduring and overpowering that you might just have to remind yourself every day for the rest of your life, that God loves you, and there's **nothing you can do about it**.

Except **respond**. Respond by loving in return, with a self-giving love that can be resurrected into new life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 545.

<sup>7</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2, pg. 545.

In my relatively short eight months here I have already had the privilege of being with some of you in times of great sadness, and also great joy. The best part of my work is that I get to be with people, to listen to people. And what I am learning, what I have heard, is about how members take care of each other. A note dropped in the mail. A meal brought. A phone call to check in. Always welcomed, often unexpected. And the response is always the same. I know what it feels like to receive, and now I want to give.

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**Belief – oneness – love. Transformation – transition – response.**

The secret Jesus shares with us, that thing that is the most essential thing of all, is love, and our response to it. And when our lives and our community are rooted in this acceptance and response, then belief and oneness flow, transformation and transition are expected.

I am coming to know this community as place where Jesus' hope, as prayed in his farewell discourse, flourishes.

This is not to say we're perfect, or that we have perfectly embodied this hope. But there is an openness to **transformation** here at St. James.

The leap of imagination it took to leave one place and build a new home – one that embodies the expectation of welcoming more people into community – is an example of that. What I heard from the Search Committee – a desire to go deeper in spiritual life and deeper in service and connection with the wider community – is another. And now I am hearing so many ideas, and having so many conversations, about what comes next. There is a sense of expectation hanging in the air!

Openness to **transition** is also evident in who this community is today: the herculean work of transition you undertook with Rev. Portia was not just about the bricks and mortar, but also included the building up of the Body of Christ in this place, a healthy community with norms and which understands how to work through conflict (something that always arises with change.)

And **response** is something solid here. So many folks in this community have a keen sense of the presence of God's love in their lives. This creates a soul deep gratitude that is the well from which they draw, and their response is serving and caring for others with that love. They serve as icons for the rest of us, inviting us into that way of being the heart and hands of Christ in the world.

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St. James' has gone through a lot of change in the last fifteen years – you might even say that's been the only constant. And calling a new Rector can seem, in some ways, like the culmination of a time of change. And yet, change is still afoot here – do you feel it too? I can sense the Spirit blowing among us and quickening the air.

What is coming? Who are we becoming? How will we change next? I don't know – but I do know that the answers to those and so many other questions will be found here, because we already have all that we need: **Belief – oneness – love.**

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We are in a liminal place today. Still Easter, but after the Ascension. Looking ahead to Pentecost, while hearing together the final prayer of Jesus for his friends before his Passion. Together let us *lean in* toward the transformation and transition we are living into – rooted in the abiding love that flows from God and among us all.

~AMEN~