



**Southeastern Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A – 5/24/2020**

My name is Pastor Jill Henning and I serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Administration for the Bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA. I bring you greetings and prayers from Bishop Strickland and the whole Southeastern Synod Staff on this 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter.

It seems like, as we enter this last Sunday of Easter and another Sunday of living through this global pandemic that we are living in the midst of something new. So many people have talked about how in this post COVID world we will be living in a “new normal”. Life as we have known it, will not be life as it is now, even as so many struggle with this new existence. We remember life before physical distancing and cloth face coverings. We remember life when we could gather with family and friends to celebrate graduations and birthdays and well just a Sunday afternoon meal.

Life was then, and now we live in a world of uncertainty. We aren't sure what this new normal looks like. We don't know this world, where we live not knowing if the person standing next to us at the grocery store is asymptomatic and they don't know if we are. We don't know what returning to physically gathering for worship will be like, when not everyone will feel comfortable being present and we can't sit near our friends or sing in our choirs.

Our lives are defined now between our Before Covid time and After Covid time and this divide between what was and what will be is yet to be determined and there are more questions than there are answers. How long will it be like this? What do we do moving forward? What's

essential? What's important? How do we want to live in this world while struggling with how others are wanting to live in this world? We see the struggle to hang on to what was before COVID and we see the struggle to adjust to what will be after Covid. These are life changing times for each of us and we all know how much we love change.

We've all been here before but maybe not in such a globally significant way. A birth of new child, a loss of someone we love, a change in a job, an illness, a marriage, a move – these are the times when our lives have been dramatically shifted from one existence to another and they were full of questions about who we are, who we want to be and what we hope and pray will be. There are no right answer to any of those questions, in the same way that each of us who faces this crisis are coming to realize.

Our gospel lesson for today, on this last Sunday of Easter comes at one of those times for Jesus as well. We as the reader, have a perspective on what is happening because we view this from the other side of the empty tomb but today's gospel comes from what is known as the farewell discourse. It's the night of the last supper, Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples and he begins a long speech about his leaving and his coming death. It's long – it takes up four chapters in John's gospel, it goes on for 117 verses. During it, Jesus talks about what it all means and what it will be like for the disciples and if we read closely we can get a glimpse of what Jesus is going through.

John says at the beginning of this farewell speech that “Jesus was troubled in spirit” (John 13:21), that he knows that one of his disciples will betray him. He gets, what I can only guess, frustrated that even after everything Phillip still asks him to “show us the Father” and Jesus replies “Have I been with you all this time...and you still do not know me?” (John 14:9) In the middle of this farewell it's almost like he questions the disciple's intention when he says, “If

you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15) and at the same time he knows that the world hated him and that in the end even his disciples will abandon him (John 16:32).

All of that is to say, that Jesus in today’s lesson, comes to God in prayer with a heavy heart and basically unloads it all. We’ve probably have, at some point or another, come to God like this. Overwhelmed with the circumstances of life and our prayers seem to be just trying to figure out what’s going on. In this prayer, Jesus is at one of those significant points between what was and what will be.

I’ve always found it interesting that this passage comes in our lectionary after the church’s celebration of the Ascension of Jesus, which fell on the calendar last Thursday and next Sunday’s celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. We are in an in-between time, the time between Jesus ascending into heaven and when God sends the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to become the church. That in-between time must have been scary for those followers of Jesus. It must have been a time where they didn’t know where they were going or what the future was going to hold.

So in the midst of this in-between time, the lectionary gives us this text and it gives us a glimpse of how Jesus dealt with his own personal in-between time. Here we see that Jesus isn’t as different from us as we often think or want him to be. Whether or not he fully understood what was going to happen next, we don’t know, but we see and hear him struggling with his own struggles, working out his own issues. We see his humanity struggling with the question of what may be.

That’s where we are today, isn’t it? We struggle to see the way forward, we struggle to understand our new normal, we struggle to see how we fit into this world and how to live as God’s children safely and responsibly. We have more questions than we have answers.

I can't tell you how to even begin to answer these really hard questions but what our gospel shows us is Jesus who also struggled. And here is what he didn't do – he didn't cut himself off from God or his disciples, he didn't get angry or resentful, he didn't get frustrated or complain nor does he deny the reality of what is happening. This long farewell discourse shows us that he feels all the feelings, he grieves, he weeps, he gathers his friends, he prays and then he lives in faith.

Almost 3 years ago and I'm going to be honest with you, I don't even remember when or what I said, I preached a sermon at my last congregation where I challenged those listening to post on their social media the phrase "Today I will choose faith over fear" just to see if declaring that publicly would reshape how they viewed the world and the struggles that were going on at that time. I don't remember what those struggles were, as I said, I don't even remember the specific sermon but I remember that specific saying because every day since I preached that sermon, one of the members of Trinity in Lilburn has offered that as her status on Facebook – every day, except she modified it to say "Today I will choose faith and love over fear. Shine your light". Every day.

Every day it is a reminder that we have a God who was willing to pray for us, who was willing to die for us, who was willing to not let death have the last word and who sends God's Holy Spirit to empower us. Every day. Every day it is a reminder that we live on this side of Easter.

I'm thankful for her witness to me and to those who see it, that we do have a choice to live in faith and love. May that be our prayer in the midst of this in between what was and what will be that God give us the strength and the grace to choose faith and love over fear. That we might have the faith to live in this new normal, recognizing that God comes to us, to make us

one, even though we are a part. That we might have the faith to trust those whom God has given the scientific knowledge to guide us through this crisis. That we might have the faith and love to care for one another in our actions, to protect one another. That we might have the faith and love to shape how God is calling us to let our lights shine.

There is much to be fearful of but there is also much to have faith in. This is God's Church and God can span the distance between us and Jesus prayed that God would protect us and make us one. May we have faith in that. Amen