

C Easter 5 5.19.19

John 13:31-35

Focus Statement: Jesus loves us.

In honor of having just returned from our own bishop's election, I want to share the story of a bishop's election I was part of six years ago in California. I'm sure I've shared this story before, but it's one of my favorites and I think it bears repeating as one of the most spiritual experiences I've ever had.

So this synod assembly started at 3 pm on a Thursday, as gatherings of people trying to accomplish business through Roberts' Rules of Order are wont to do, with a nearly three hour fight over procedure. A fight that I found particularly annoying, not just because the opening session was only supposed to last two and a half hours to begin with, and that three hour fight meant we were all an hour late to dinner, but also because I was good friends with the chair of the elections committee. I knew the months she'd put into trying to set up the process to be as fair and transparent as possible. A system some grumpy dude, who was probably mainly there because he was the only person in his congregation who could get out of work for two days, had forced us to completely redo following three hours of boring conversation. But eventually, we cast the first nominating ballot and got to leave. So imagine my intense delight the next morning to get up and discover that because we started at three and didn't vote until six, and the registration table had continued to allow people to register and receive ballots, there were considerably more ballots cast than there had been people credentialed when the session had started, leading to having to have the entire first day's vote thrown out and redone. Leading to not only more work, but also,

because of the time needed to count ballots, more time to fight about procedure. By the time we broke for lunch, I was seriously considering breaking out entirely.

But then we came back from lunch and started with the five-minute candidate statements, and something funny started happening. This sense of the Holy Spirit started showing up in the space. We heard the statements, recast ballots, and the candidates went from six to four, and those four all felt right. Then we had Q and A time, and voted again and the four went down to three, and again it just felt right. More questions, another vote, three to two, and this calm fell over the gathered assembly.

Here's the background detail I didn't mention, one of these candidates was the Rev. Dr. R. Guy Erwin, who in addition to being a brilliant Reformation scholar, wonderful pastoral presence, and all-around nice person, is a partnered gay man. So some of that tension in the room was about the possibility of the historic statement of electing the ELCA's first openly gay bishop. Southwest California Synod, like much of the ELCA, had been hit pretty hard from the ELCA's decision to start ordaining LGBTQ clergy, and no one was really sure how this next step would unfold. But following the debacle of Thursday, each step of the process it was just increasingly clear that Pastor Erwin was being lifted up as the next bishop. All of the candidates were excellent, it wasn't like there was a bad choice, but there was just so clearly the right choice for that moment, that by the time we got to the last vote, two names on the ballot with the winner being the bishop, voting felt out of our hands. We prayed, we voted, and when the results appeared on the screen, showing the majority going to Pastor Erwin, a silence I can only describe as holy fell over the assembly. And then the

entire room exploded in raucous applause. The woman next to me, whom I had at this point not spoken to, wrapped her arms around me and hugged me. Through her tears, she explained that in 2009 her children's church had left the ELCA over the decision to ordain LGBTQ clergy, and her children, in response, had left not only that congregation but church entirely. The bitterness that fight produced made her children not feel safe. If their church couldn't embrace everyone, they felt like it could no longer embrace them. "I know we still have a long way to go," she said to me, "I know this doesn't make everyone welcoming. But maybe this is a step, maybe my kids could feel safe in church again, could come back again, could bring my grandchildren back, if they really knew they truly were welcome."

There is this weird thing that happens sometimes at synod assemblies and other large gatherings of the church, where in the middle of a contentious discussion something will happen that will make the whole thing feel sacredly out of our hands. I wasn't there, but I've heard a similar feeling of peaceful inevitability settled over the assembly at the 2013 churchwide assembly that elected Elizabeth Eaton as the first female Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. The vote was historic, but it felt not like a first but like a Spirit-led movement. Like the opening up of who could be called by God to positions of leadership in the church was happening not by us but for us. We act, not knowing what we are doing, what the results of those actions might be, and through those uncertain actions, the Reign of God expands.

Our Gospel reading for this morning might sound familiar, because we read it a month ago on Maundy Thursday. Jesus said these words to his disciples on the night of his betrayal,

having just washed their feet, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer... Where I am going, you cannot come." By "a little longer" he meant less than twenty-four hours, and by where he was going he meant the cross, he meant death. In a few minutes he will tell them, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," and that is what Jesus was preparing to do. But before he did that, he gave his disciples this one last commandment, "love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Love one another. What strikes me about this command is that it is an action, not a belief or an idea. Jesus didn't command them to believe in him, or to teach others about him, he told them to love one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I think Jesus told the disciples this because he knew that it was going to be hard to believe. There were going to be times that would be dark, days that would be hard. The crucifixion itself yes, but even past that. Even after the resurrection, the appearances in the locked room, the breakfast on the beach, the disciples were going to face tough days. Days that it was going to be hard to trust that things were still going as they ought, hard to believe that God was still with them. And on those days, in those moments, when belief would feel hard to come by, they were going to have to rely on something a little more concrete, they were going to have to rely on the love of each other. And that love would be what would hold them when they could not believe.

Dear friends in Christ, this is why we still gather every Sunday, this is why we still meet in communities, why church still matters. Because it can be hard to believe. Just belief in itself, that someone could rise from the dead, is one thing. But holding that belief when things are hard. When faced with an illness, or loss of a job, or a broken relationship, or a broken world, believing in the face of those things that God still loves you, that God is still with you, that God has still got you, that can feel impossible. So in those times when you cannot believe, it is my prayer for you, and I think the reason God gave us church, that you can come here and know that you are loved. That you can rest in love until you find your way to belief again. And on the days when you do believe, when things are good and God feels near and the world is as it should, you can come here and share that love with someone else. You can be the person who holds the belief of another, so that they have a place to rest in their struggle.

Dear people of God, Jesus loves you. May you know love, may you be love. Amen.