

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Fifth Sunday of Easter/April 24, 2016

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“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus said at the Last Supper, “that you love one another.” Let me share some vignettes of Saint Paul's from the past week. We do this at every vestry meeting, looking for the spiritual that is all around us. Last Sunday, we had four choirs assembled under the direction of guest conductor Frank Boles. Frank noticed that as each choir member from Saint Paul's partnered with another to process up the aisle they smiled at each other. Not only that, he observed that the visiting choir members began doing the same. When asked isn't that normal, he said not at all. There is something loving about this place. At the vestry meeting Monday night, one of the members spoke of the Parents' Exchange, a support and learning group of parents while their children are in Godly Play or Rite 13. He told of how deeply caring a community this is, not closed but open and inviting of all. Wednesday I had to have a surgical procedure at Chestnut Hill Hospital. As I waited in pre-op, one of our parishioners who is a nurse anesthetist came in and gave me a big hug. The other nurses began recalling his same-gender wedding at Saint Paul's to his partner, now husband Dan. There was great laughter and joy. There were two funerals this week that spoke of God's goal of making all things new. The first was Patsy who at age 88 had been in a wheelchair and unable to speak for 5 years. In life eternal she dwells fully with God where “the first things” of her incapacitation have passed away. She now knows the freedom of God's saving love. The second was Betsy who at age 36 had spent 20 years suffering from depression and addiction. She too is with God where the pain and trauma of that addiction is no more. God says, “See, I am making all things new.” And now today we celebrate baptism. We are bringing two children into God's household. Their parents and godparents are making a solemn promise to bring these children up in the fellowship of the church where the new commandment is to love one another. This is just in one

week here. And you could easily add more stories – contagious smiles; caring community; the joy of marriage whether of same or different genders; the welcome home of God at the end, that frees us from whatever pushes our lives out of shape; the welcome by God at the beginning that starts us on a life journey of love and forgiveness. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” God says, “the beginning and the end.”

It is significant that one the first quarrels in the church was not over doctrine but over this fellowship of love. Peter had just gone to Caesarea and baptized a whole household of Gentiles. They were not circumcised, that went contrary to the doctrine of the time. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the other apostles were not so concerned that he baptized non-Jews, but that he had eaten a meal with them. Remember the earliest church was all Jewish. Fellowship was kept separate. It reminds us that we have to watch the walls that creep in to divide us. We live in a world where it is easy to bring into the church a lot of negativity. And we can be so overcome by anxiety that we act it out hurtfully. In Peter’s story, God steps in. The Spirit told Peter to make no distinction between them and us. And Peter explains, “who was I that I could hinder God?” God is serious about the fellowship of love that binds believers together.

At the last supper before Jesus gives the new commandment of love, Judas leaves. Mean-spiritedness and betrayal leave the room and the outer night is seen for a moment before the door is closed. Jesus now takes the role of father at the Passover meal. “Little children,” he explains, this night is different. I am with you only a little while longer. Love one another, and he repeats it three times. This is a new commandment, new because soon Jesus will show just what that love means, a giving of self spontaneously, freely for the life of others. Love one another.

When we live into the power of that love it becomes irresistible. When we take the vignettes that I offered at the beginning of this sermon as normative for who we are, then loving power and joy flows from us that will make people generally love their neighbors. How could they not in the face of such witness. As long as this love is present, the world is still encountering Jesus – and people make their choice for the light, to believe that there will be a

day of resurrection. This is the fulfillment of all our dreams for community where we are at home with God and God dwells with us. God is so serious about this fellowship that the Book of Revelation concludes with it. The first things that rob life from being vibrant and joyful, are done away. There is a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Word-pictures paint what it might look like for God's eternal world to break through. Let me conclude with an adaptation of a poem that I call The New Philadelphia. You can close your eyes and just imagine, if you wish.

"I saw a vision. I was standing looking down over the city;  
and the swift clouds of the spring sky broke open above my head  
and the Spirit of God breathed on my eyes  
and my eyes were opened.

"I saw Philadelphia, the holy city, coming down out of heaven;  
shining like a rare jewel, sparkling like "clear water in the eye of the sun;"  
and all the sickness was gone from the city,  
no longer was one neighborhood seeking advantage over another;  
there was no difference between Kensington and Chestnut Hill.

"I saw the Schuylkill, running with the water of life,  
as bright as crystal,  
as clear as glass,  
the children of South Philly swimming in it.

"And the Spirit showed me the tree of life  
growing in Penn Treaty Park.

"I looked out and there were no more homeless people,  
no more women working the streets,  
no more needles in the alleys or parks,  
HIV and AIDS were things of the past,  
there were no more racist attacks,  
no more gay bashing,

no more school shootings or homicides in the city,  
no more defacing of synagogues,  
because there was no more hate.

“And I saw women walking safe at nights,  
saw the men were full of passion and gentleness,  
that none of the children were ever abused,  
because people’s sexuality and power were full of justice and joy.

“I saw an old woman throw back her head  
and laugh like a young girl;  
and when the sky closed back, her laughter rang in my head  
for days and days  
and would not go away.

“This is what I saw looking up from the city of untimely death,  
brother against brother, sister against sister;  
And I knew then that there would be a day of resurrection,  
And I believe  
that there will be a day of resurrection.”

*Amen.*