

Acts 10:44-48

John 15:9-17

1 John 5:1-6

“Let the rivers clap their hands,
and let the hills ring out with joy
before the Lord.” AMEN!

Our scripture lesson today invite us, again,
into Jesus’ metaphor of the vine and the branches.

If some of the lessons today sound familiar
that is because they have each expounded
upon previous passages
that we’ve read in church.

I even had to double check,
thinking “Didn’t we already read
this last week?” :-)

It just goes to prove, I guess,
that it is impossible (even for Jesus)
to explain his relationship to God and
our relationship to Jesus
in one sentence, or two, or 5!

You get the point.

There’s a promise of belonging being made
which takes a long time to explain and digest,
but it makes an important distinction.

You are not only invited.
You are not only included.

You, in fact, belong. (Pause)

Rewind your memory with me a minute.

Your teacher reaches into their desk drawer
and pulls out the whistle.

A clear sign that it is recess time!

Remember recess?

Free time in school to go outside and play.
Recess was what I wanted to major in!

But sometimes there was anxiety because
there were occasions when everyone was
forced to go through the “choosing ritual.”

Yes, the old ritual of picking teams!

Everyone lined up shoulder to shoulder
as if in a police line up.

“Oh no,” you say to yourself.

“Will I be chosen near the beginning?”

“Will I be chosen at all?”

As the teams began to take shape,
it's apparent that best friends get picked first,
even before the stronger athletic individuals,
but those gifted with athleticism,
don't wait long.

Your anxiety begins to somersault in your belly
as one team begins to look stronger than
the other.

Your desperate to be picked, but hopefully
it will be by the stronger team.

Pretty soon, you hope for either
captain to pick you.

“Give me a place to belong,” is the prayer,
because even getting picked by the weaker
team is better than not picked at all. (Pause)

The old playground ritual is a difficult way
to learn the meaning of belonging.

It is a hard teacher like learning how
to behave at funerals.

While you don't need instructions,

you might not know what to say
to others at a funeral.

There's often talk about the weather, or
queries about the children.

"Did you hear about the destructive
tornadoes up north?" "Yes, terrible!"

"Has Patty had her baby, yet?"
"Yes, she came last week,
their 7th child!"

"How can they afford so many?"

"I can't wait until we can make another
trip to the beach." "I hope the weather holds!"

You know the kinds of things we say,
when we don't know what to say.

Then, everything stops when the widow, or
the widower, comes into the room.

And you see the face of one that
must "face" life without
their loved one.

Maybe there's children who now

have to navigate growing up
without one of their parents.

You don't need instructions on what to do
or how to behave, but that doesn't mean
you know what to say. (Pause)

Belonging, it has a way of being taught in
the difficult times on the playground as well as
in the beautiful moments of acceptance
and embrace.

In the pit-of-the-stomach snapshots of
picking teams and of a place prepared
for you without your expecting.

You see, it is possible to hear the good news
even when panic runs all over us. (Pause)

St. Stephen is not immune
from experiences of panic.

We had some a couple years back
with COVID isolation and then a major
building renovation was needed
in the sanctuary.

Before that you had the retirement of
your beloved Pastor Marda, as pastor here,

because she chose an early retirement
to care for her dear, Woods.

A person who was also dear to those of you
who'd been here a long time.

These are just a few of the anxieties, fears,
and panics in these last 6 years.

There have been other things for you
personally (and communally) that you've
gone through together.

Those who have been here 25 or more years
know about the "panic attacks" that
occurred during the original planning
and construction of this space and

the new office/lobby area, and then when
people left this congregation to start another one,

the retirement of beloved Pastor Emory and
the work of becoming an RIC Congregation.

You are not immune to experiences of panic.

Yet, somehow the good news was still heard, here.

How do I know?

Because this place goes on.

This community still lives and it lives
through the gospel news and through
the belonging that continues to
manifest itself here. (Pause)

This all goes to show us a little of what
the feelings of panic the disciples might have
been encountering in our gospel.

John is heavy with abiding language
(3 times in just 2 verses).

The word means “to dwell in,” or “to live inside.”

Jesus said it all so that their “joy would be complete,”
even amidst panic.

So that they’d know, in him,
they belong together.

Jesus will show them what God’s love looks like.

Later they will come to know how
God’s love empowers them to press on and
then sends them out.

Out, in order to love one another
the way Jesus loved them. (Pause)

William Bausch retells the story from
Christopher de Vinck in his book, *The Power of
the Powerless*, to underscore what Jesus meant.

“One spring afternoon,” he writes.

“My five year old son, David, and I
were planting raspberry bushes along the
side of the garage.

A neighbor joined us for a few moments.

David pointed to the ground.

‘Look, Daddy! What’s that?’

I stopped talking to my neighbor and looked down.

‘It’s a beetle,’ I said.

David was impressed and pleased with
the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature.

My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on
the insect giving his boot an extra

twist in the dirt.

‘That ought to do it,’ he laughed.

David looked up at me waiting
for an explanation, a reason.

That night, just before I turned out
the light in his bedroom,

David whispered, ‘I liked that beetle, Daddy.’

‘I did too,’ I whispered back.

De Vinck concludes his story by saying,
“We have the power to choose.” (Pause)

That’s the belonging that Jesus called
his disciples into and we are called into it, too.

We have the power to choose the way
we will respond to every living thing
that crosses our paths.

The power to love or not. (Pause)

Have you heard the tragedy around
Princess Alice’s death.

She was the second daughter of Queen Victoria.

She was an angel on earth that delivered children and cared for diseased relatives when no one else would.

Later in life, her youngest son died after falling out a window.

She was devastated and attached herself even more to her other children, especially to her only living son, Ernest, and her newborn girl, Marie.

When her children began to get ill from diphtheria, Marie (the infant) was the first to die, as Alice rushed to her bed, Marie choked to death.

Ernest was quarantined and learned of his sister's death a few days later.

His grief was even worse than Alice could have imagined and at first he didn't believe it, but then sat up in bed grief stricken and wailing.

Alice broke the rule about making contact

with the ill and rushed to her son to
comfort him and give him a kiss.

A month later she was dead.

Was it foolish? Stupid? Dumb?

Yes, of course it was all of those things,
but no one ever said love was logical.

No one ever said loving others is safe.

Who could ever claim that love would deliver
Jesus to the cross?

Who could ever say that was sensible?

Yet, it is, in God's Kingdom.

A place, in which, we are called to belong.

AMEN!