

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

Revelation 22:12-21

“Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and
give thanks to God’s holy name.” AMEN!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)

This is the last Sunday of Easter!

The seventh Sunday of Easter brings us to
the closing portion of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer
in John’s gospel.

The prayer Jesus delivered to God
with the disciples in the room to overhear.

The prayer that we also get to overhear and
the part we have this morning is the part
that is about all of us.

The first part of his prayer,
Jesus prayed for himself.

The second part,
Jesus prayed for the disciples,

and now the third part:
Jesus prayed for the ones yet to be.

For us, for the church, and for the world...

He prayed for each of us in our ability,
for courage, and

the receptiveness to witness.

And this reminds us of our call to witness to the world.

What will we say?

How will we live?

How will we “be” church for those
still yet to come? (Pause)

To get some of those possible answers
we might turn to any of the texts assigned
to the worship today.

Psalm 97 is a good start:

The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice;
the heavens declare your righteousness, and
all the peoples see your glory.

These are the positive words, rejoice!

Point to God, and recognize God’s glory
but the psalm has other less “peppy or happy”
things to say.

“Fire goes before the Lord,
burning up enemies on every side.

Lightning(s) light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord.”
Not a happy song here.

No sugary message from the psalmist because
humanity was off course.

We are still off course.

What do we say and do
as a church and follower of Jesus?

The texts today show that a reckoning is necessary...

A separation is coming from God,
not God separating God's self from humans,
God humanity being separated BY God.

The sheep over here and
the goats over there.

And if we look closely, we find even
the lectionary wants to soften Jesus'
words of judgment.

Did you notice the 3 verses that were not included
in our reading from Revelation?

Verse 14, we read:

Blessed are those who wash their robes so
that they will have the right to the tree of life and
may enter the city by the gates,"

we then have the omitted verse 15,
"Outside are the dogs and
sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and

idolaters and everyone who
loves and practices falsehood.

These are Jesus' words in Revelation (not mine) as
he promised there will be a separation, a
sorting of humanity.

How do our hearts receive these words on
this last Sunday of Easter? (Pause)

There's a story that many of you might have heard
but it is fitting to our lessons today.

A group of people gathered at the gates of heaven
and St. Peter met them there.

On their orientation of heaven they came upon
a large building that went on as far as the eye could see.

As they approached this building,
with no windows or doors,

St. Peter asked the group to pass by quietly so as
to not alert those inside of their presence.

They dutifully followed Peter's request and when
they were far enough away, one
inquisitive soul asked why they needed
to be silent around that building?

St. Peter responded, "God put all the Lutherans in there,
and they think they are the only ones in heaven." :-)

The truth is, many denominations and religions
think they have the exclusive blessing of God and
that everyone else is cursed.

We want to be the sorters!

I suppose it is part of our human nature.

But we also need to know that denomination leaders
have used such tactics to comfort and keep
their members reliant on them.

And people tend to like it when they don't need to change
but everyone else does, right?!

Yet, Jesus tells us, a reckoning is necessary.

When we hear of the occasional church leader
challenging the narrow minded doctrine of
the "us vs them" analogy those preachers
are often run out of town.

A recent study revealed that, for the first time ever,
people are leaving their churches if the pastor
makes a critical statement about a
member's political party or their
preferred political leader.

More than ever people are going to churches
that mirror what their politicians say!!

Some are even leaving when the pastor

talks too much about politics.

And more and more churches are ignoring
the teachings of God and the examples of living
revealed by Jesus to follow a distorted system
that promotes bigotry and isolationism.

But what did Jesus say, in his prayer,
just before he went outside and was quickly arrested?

He said, "Let me be in them as you, O Father,
are in me, and that they may become completely one,
so that the world may know that you sent me
and have loved them even as you loved me."

(Pause)

When we go about living with Jesus "in us,"
we cannot be isolationist, we come to humility and
we come speaking, living, and

refusing to bow
to earthly leader's wills, refusing to pursue affluence for
its own sake.

These refusals will make us into political enemies
with those powers that want us to fall into line.

But, the politics of Jesus, in John's gospel,
are about unity and witness.

But not union or witness that rejects God's love, but
the kind that accepts Jesus' desire

to bring everyone into the fold.

God is still judging the nations and we too
are still being judged when we fail to stand up
to the injustice done by the nations.

For some though, it's hard to find out
salvation is not a one and done.

We like the one and done...
it allows for isolationism, judgment and status quo.

So we receive these words today, knowing that
we are called to be disturbers of the false peace
the world pushes.

There's no peace in the arms race!

How many times must we blow up the earth?

Once seems to not be enough.

There is no peace when weapons designed
to kill in rapid succession and when body armor
is readily available to purchase by any person.

We are disturbers of fake unity,
that tribalism claims on our nation.

We disturb the phony peace that's promised in greed.

We are disturbers of the distorted peace
that teaches guns solve our problems. (Pause)

Followers of Jesus are caught in between
the waiting and the pain.

Our souls long for a word of hope and
a song for the Lord's coming.

In these days of suffering many are forfeiting Jesus' prayer
to witness and unite and many are being
led to follow something or someone else.

Jesus' message is even harder in our society
that looks to comfort and security through affluence
and gated communities.

Instead of doing the will of God,
desperation has taken hold and
it is leading our society, our people and
our children to hopelessness.

But the church, the renewed church,
is in the process of a deep cleaning.

You see, Jesus overturned the tables and threw out
the greedy profiteers, but he did not curse the temple,
just what folks had done to it.

The church is not cursed either, since
Jesus is already in us and around us, cleansing us. (Pause)

In many ways, the days we read about in
the Acts of the Apostles are like the days we live in.

The young slave girl in her encounter with Paul and Silas.

She, like so many trafficked in our society was held
against her will and her want.

She was being taken advantage of and used
to make someone else money...
objectified and manipulated

When Paul healed her
it hurt the wallet of her owners.

They lost a great deal of money, the Bible said.

So the girl's owners seized Paul and Silas and
dragged them into public to be judged in
the open square.

Their message: beware to those who stand up
to wealthy traffickers, beware to those who speak
against race supremacy, beware to those
who stand up to lobby groups who ignore
the health and safety of our children,

since they may well have connections
with magistrates and public officials.

Yet, those who stand up have a power from the Holy Spirit.

A power that breaks chains, shackles and sets captives free!

A call from God and a charge from Jesus
to make a witness of God's death defying love.

Interesting that Paul and Silas's charges were
"disturbing the peace."

Notice they include the charge of advocating
different customs and that really whips up the crowd
to the point of attack.

People under poor leadership attack those who are different.

The accusers want the crowd to know
these men are followers of Jewish traditions.

Nothing musters hatred and violence as much as
knowing a political leader is there *with* you, tickling
and encouraging disunity and violence.

The writer of Acts is forthright and honest about
the violence put upon those who follow and
witness to Jesus.

He tells the story as if no one expected anything
different from the Roman Empire.

We too must be startled out of the urge to quietly accept
the violence we see inflicted on others in our
community and our nation.

May we never let these mass shootings become normalized.

We pray with Jesus that we may be one
in unity and strength.

We pray that we may be like Paul and Silas who
disturb the false peace of magistrates and
child traffickers and that

when we too are persecuted for following Jesus,
we sing hymns to God and worship even in shackles,
bound in the center of the prison.

And that we may be witnesses of God breaking
the shackles and chains to save lives.

AMEN!