

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae, *Associate for Pan-Asian Ministry*

on

Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

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Our Teacher's New Commandment

Twenty years ago, right after finishing graduate school, I was seriously thinking about my life, vocation and career. Having a retreat, I prayed with all my heart before God over how to live and what to do in my life ahead. Then I came up with three wishes for my life. And one of them was to meet a teacher whom I could trust and follow. The wish to meet a teacher seemed the easiest among the three, but surprisingly, it was only wish that was not certain when it would come true, until recently. I met many good teachers and scholars from whom I had a lot to learn, but I felt like I had never met the one yet. After about 20 years had passed since I had an unfulfilled wish, I was almost giving up having a teacher of my life. However, while contemplating today's Gospel, I have realized how much Jesus wants the world to know who his disciples are. And I have also realized that the teacher in my life that I was so eager to meet is none other than Jesus. Perhaps it might be too obvious, but to recognize it now is both happy and sad. In any case, this realization of accepting him as a teacher from the depths of my heart is a very important event, beyond the level of understanding with my head.

Today, May 15th, is a day commemorated as 'Teacher's Day' in Korea. Isn't it too surprising to be a coincidence? Today, many Koreans visit their teachers to greet them with some gifts and eat together. You can never underestimate the influence a teacher you meet in your life and how that can lead to a profound outcome on one's life.

The reason that I really wanted to find a true teacher was probably out of longing for someone to lead me, to inspire me. Even though I met a lot of great teachers, I had to wait for more than 20 years because I expected more than knowledge or wisdom from the teacher I was looking for. Jesus who we see in today's Gospel is not simply a teacher who teaches knowledge or wisdom. He is a teacher who stays with his disciples, shares his life with them, teaches them personally through his own life, and eventually lays down his life for them.

At the beginning of John's Gospel when the two disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus and say "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus answers, "come and see." As Rowan Williams said, discipleship is about how we live. It is about a state of being. Jesus says to his disciples, "Abide in me." "Abide in my love." What He wants of us as disciples is to abide in Him, to live in His love.

The people of the world already know who Jesus is. Our job is not to try to inform them about Jesus, but to love them, love each other. Then, when they see how we love each other, they come to know that we are disciples of Jesus. Realizing that the teacher in my life is 'Jesus' is something that will bring about a fundamental and groundbreaking innovation in my attitude and faith in my life. Living as a little Christ who

reveals Him through our lives, through who we are means living as his disciples. No other teacher had ever taught us something so clearly, no one had lived what she or he taught, and no teacher had embraced her or his students with such great love. How blessed we are to have a teacher like Jesus. We must never take for granted the commandments our teacher has given us.

He says, 'My beloved disciples, I will give you a new commandment.'

On the night when Judas went out to commit the terrible betrayal of Jesus, on the night that one of disciples whom he loved so much sold him over, on the night of this great anguish, Jesus did not simply dwell in anguish after Judas left to sell him over. He was clearly aware of the reasons and implications for all of this, and he did not forget to inform these to his disciples as well. A person who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God and claimed to be the Son of God could be seen as a "failure" who was absurdly betrayed by one of his disciples and finally crucified. He could have fallen for that kind of uneasiness himself. But he was clearly aware the situation that may appear as "failure" to human eyes is actually the way for the Son of Man to be glorified, and also the way for God to be glorified. This is Christian paradox. There is Christian truth in that paradox that 'failure' becomes 'success'. Therefore, it will be a 'new commandment'.

'Love each other.' This commandment, which is so familiar to us, is nothing new, but in fact, how difficult it is to put it into practice. The commandments to love God and to love neighbor must have been familiar to the Jews as well.

We can see in Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament, "you shall fear the Lord your God; him you shall serve; to him you shall hold fast." In Leviticus, "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

According to Deuteronomy Chapter 14, the regulations on tithing for the poor are as follows. 'Once every three years, give out all the tithes of your produce and store it in the city, so that the Levites, wanderers, orphans, and widows in your city may come and eat to their satisfaction. They lived a temple-centered life and thoroughly paid tithing to help neighbors in need. We can imagine how thoroughly they kept the law. However, the commandment to love each other with the love of the Master who washes the feet of his disciples, even the feet of the disciple who sold him off, and the love he loved to death is definitely a new commandment. This "commandment" is "new" because it is grounded not in the commands of the Jewish tradition but in the self-offering of Jesus, the Son of God.

We heard it in the Revelation today. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth." Unlike the Greek word '*neos*', which means 'new or recent in time', the Greek word '*kainon*' for 'new' refers to something qualitatively new. Therefore, 'a new heaven and a new earth' is not the renewal of the first heaven and the first earth. It means the creation of a qualitatively completely different new order. This new heaven and new earth are the place where God will be present, and God's reign will be complete.

"God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." In the New Jerusalem, God will be eternally present, and the first things will all be gone, and there will be God's comfort and beautiful fellowship between God and His people.

Being a Christian means being a little Christ. Jesus said it clearly. "Love one another as I have loved you." Although it is a community gathered to follow Jesus, there is not a single church without conflict. There are people who prefer mega churches where anonymity is preserved and where they can attend worship services without interacting with other people. There might be many who prefer to worship online at home these days. However, being a real Christian is possible only with 'us', not me alone. The Lord's Prayer is not my prayer, but our prayer. It's not "my father who art in Heaven," but "our father who art in Heaven." The author of the Book of Revelation says, "Behold, I make all things new." The way God makes all things new is by being with people where they live and wiping away all tears of their eyes. In our church, are we

living a life that wipes away each other's tears and comforts the world's pain? In our gathering, is there God's work of making all things new?

It is said that there is nothing new under the sky, according to the book of Proverbs. But why does the Bible keep talking about new, a new heaven, a new earth, new wine, and a new commandment? It is about restoration of what we have lost. We humans have a habit of losing our essence too easily and grasping for non-essential things if we are not awake. And in the name of laws and traditions, we struggle to hold on to it. But there is nothing that must be observed other than the essence, God's love. Jesus came to this earth to show that love, God's love is not only the motive of his sending the Son into the world, but love is the revelation itself. And the church is just a gathering to follow him and continue to show that love in the world. If our church cannot fulfill its mission, there is no reason for its existence. Without love, it is just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. We must always be awake and ask ourselves. 'Is there love in my word and in my deed?' If we have lived with love today, that's it. That's more than enough. We have lived a sufficiently new day, a new heaven and a new earth. And that's exactly what our teacher commands us, abiding in him, living in his love.