

5 Easter, Year C

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

The following sermon was given by Fr. Lonnie on his final Sunday before sabbatical. He will be away for the summer, returning August 15. Learn more about his plans and the purpose of sabbatical at www.stannestifton.com/sabbatical.

As most of you are aware, today is my final Sunday with you before I depart for a three month sabbatical. Sabbatical is a required, pre-determined time of refreshment, reflection, and renewal for both priest and parish. It's grounded in the biblical idea that rest should come not only every seven days—i.e. the Sabbath—but also in a more focused way every seven years. The Old Testament offers multiple instances wherein God requires his people to put down their tools and let the land lie fallow every seven years, giving both the earth and its people time to replenish.

We Episcopalians believe in this idea. We believe in it because we have seen and know that clergy and congregations who observe sabbatical stay stronger, last longer, and experience less burnout than those who don't. In many places, including here in our own diocese, it doesn't matter if you're a deacon or a priest, a vicar, a rector, a canon, a dean, a missionary, or even the bishop: you are required to observe the spiritual practice of sabbatical. It is a requirement rather than a suggestion precisely because we know that many of our clergy—and, frankly, many of our congregations—suffer greatly from the sin of workaholism. If sabbatical weren't a requirement, there's a good chance most folks would never make the time to do it, and everyone would continually push themselves far beyond the point of burnout.

So, here we are at the threshold of this great gift, and we could not have asked for a better set of scripture readings than the ones heard today. Perhaps you noticed a common theme: *revelation*. All of today's readings make a claim that *God still speaks*. God is still revealing new things, showing new things, and saying new things. God still has much to say.

We see it first in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here comes Peter, to whom God has recently revealed that Jesus the Jewish messiah didn't come *only* for the Jewish people. Peter has discovered that God's tent is bigger and wider than anyone ever imagined. In an odd vision followed by a series of events, God has revealed to Peter that all those gentiles whom Peter long thought to be so unclean actually aren't unclean at all, at least not through the eyes of a loving God.

So here comes Peter, back to Jerusalem, when a gaggle of disciples runs up to him and says, "Peter, Peter! What in the world have you been doing, Peter? We heard you've been hanging out with *gentiles!* Peter, you know that's not a lifestyle we condone, right? Why, we even heard you were going into their houses and *baptizing* them. Peter, is this true?"

And do you know what he says to them? He says, "Listen, guys. All I can tell you is that God spoke to me. God has given me a vision and put people in my path whom I never expected

to meet. And God has made clear to me that it's not my call to decide who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's not. If someone wants to know our Lord Jesus Christ, who am I to hinder them?" The book of Acts says the disciples just stood there in amazement and joy, precisely because they knew God that had just revealed something new.

Thank God for that revelation. Thank God Peter still heard from God even after Jesus was gone because if he hadn't, you and I wouldn't be sitting here today, and we would not know the Lord Jesus Christ. God revealed something new to Peter, and it let you and me in the door. (Isn't it amazing that, in many ways, we are still working on how to believe this 2,000 years later? We still struggle to wrap our heads around the fact that what God told Peter is true: that God really will take anyone, and nobody's too unclean. We still fight and bicker—often in silence and passivity—over who's actually welcome to the fullness of the Church and who's not. What a shame.)

But maybe God is still revealing. In fact, we *know* he is because in the second reading, the book of Revelation, God shows John this glorious vision of where we are one day headed. "And behold," says John, "Behold, I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old had passed away. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne of God saying, 'Look, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them . . . and I am making all things new.'"

Brothers and sisters, these are not the words of a dead God who has nothing left to say. God is not done yet. God cares; God is involved; God is *here*. We believe God is in the business of living *among* us, of speaking *to* us, of making all things *new*. And we believe he is doing that both for us as individuals and for us as a people . . . if only we would set aside the time and muster up the courage to open our ears and hear.

At its core, *this* is exactly what I think sabbatical is about. At least, I know it's what sabbatical is about for me. You've heard me say in recent months that I'm looking forward to sabbatical because I need some time for quiet and silence. After 10 years of fulltime ministry, I need the sacred opportunity to detox from the clamor and the clangor of the world and the parish. I need to be able to reset my ears, my mind, and my heart in order to listen and hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ more clearly again. Many of you will understand what I mean when I say it is astoundingly easy to get swept up in all the business and the busy-ness, the urgency and the importance, the guilt, the grace, the ego . . . all to wake up one day and realize, "Hmm. I haven't heard anything new from God in a while." When that happens, natural though it may be, it's time to go listen. So, here I go.

But what about y'all? If sabbatical really is a gift to both of us—to me *and* to you—and if it really is about setting aside the time to listen deeply for the voice of God, then how are y'all going to spend *your* sabbatical summer? What do *you* as a parish hope to hear from God, and how do you hope to go about hearing it?

Of course, whatever y'all *do* or *don't* do this summer is out of my hands at this point. I can't guide you any further. I can't tell you what to do. And besides, it's *your* sabbatical work to do, not mine. I do know your Vestry is putting together a small Parish Sabbatical Committee to help you explore the possibilities, and I know that Sandra Giles has agreed to chair it, for which I

am grateful. While I'm not exactly sure what y'all will undertake for *your* sabbatical summer, there's at least one thing I hope and two things I know.

What I hope is this: I truly hope this sabbatical summer will be a blessing to you. I hope you will do something *special* . . . deepen your spirit, take something on, maybe build that labyrinth you've been talking about for so long. But whatever you do, I hope you'll show up this summer, do it *together*, and make it count.

And here's what I know. Number one, you are extraordinary people, and you have extraordinary leaders. Your Assistant Rector Ellen Richardson is going to take excellent care of your souls—as she already does—and the rest of our staff will be there for you, too. Your wardens Alan Peaslee and David Fant, along with your whole, fantastic vestry—Rich McDonald, Troy Spicer, Syd Blackmarr, Pam Leonard, Josh Hendrix, Bam Pirkle, Mike Collier, Art Lawton, Libby Robertson, Shelly Schmeisser, Clayton Riehle, and Betty McCorvey)—will also take good care of you, this place, and our vision. And, of course, there's all the rest of you and the countless ways you all volunteer and keep your ministries strong. I could not be leaving St. Anne's in better hands.

And the other thing I know is this: Love. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the twelve at the last supper, "Folks, I'm not going to be with you much longer. I'm not going to be here to tell you what's what, what to trust, what to say, how to act, or who to be. You're on your own, and you will have to figure it out for yourselves. *But*," he says, "there's *one thing* that will let you know *every time* whether you're on the right track or not, and that thing . . . is *LOVE*. In fact, that's how *everyone* will know that you are my disciples: that you have love for one another." These are good words to live by, for we know they are true.

Folks, have a *great* sabbatical summer.
Listen for the voice of God, for he isn't done speaking to us yet.
And in all things, love one another as Christ has loved us.

And know that I love you.

Amen.