

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

RCL Readings – Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-15; John 15:9-17

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 45:11-25; Psalm 33; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:9-17

Introduction. Easter 6 (known in the past as Rogation Sunday) precedes three days of prayer and fasting that lead up to the Feast of the Ascension. Although an ancient practice of the undivided church, Rogation (from the Latin *rogare*, to ask) can only be traced back to medieval times in the West. Recognized since 511, it always included petitions to the Lord asking for his merciful protection from the violence of nature and for his blessing that the crops be fruitful. Especially in England, but also elsewhere in Europe, local parishes (which had legal geographic definition) would “beat the bounds” to pray for protection on the community within their parish boundaries and the fruitfulness of their crops.

The ancient Jewish calendar also reflects both agricultural and spiritual inspiration. Counting the *Omer* (sheaf) takes place during the 50 days between First Fruits (the Sunday after the first Sabbath after Passover) and *Shavuot*/Pentecost. Leviticus 23:16-22 records instruction for this feast of thanksgiving for the grain crops of barley and wheat.

A people who credit the Lord with creation, no matter how urban they have become, forget at their spiritual peril the necessities he still provides in food and health.

Common Theme. We cannot connect all four of today’s lectionary readings without forcing the meaning of the texts. The Gospel and Epistle portions from John and 1 John complement each other organically as they are organized around the themes of light, love, and especially abiding. But neither connect easily to the psalm or the portion from the Acts of the Apostles focused on Gentiles.

Acts 10:44-48. The plainest meaning of the text is its most obvious. The God of Israel created a people whom he taught to be in relationship to himself. He expected that people to be his light to all the other nations (ethnicities) with whom he also intended to be in relationship (Isa 49:6). This plan to redeem them from their self-destructive patterns of life, their sin which separated them from himself, is laid out in both the Gospel and the Epistle. Therefore, the portion from Acts (which cannot be tied to a Rogation theme) can be an introductory portion to God’s loving desire to be in relationship with everyone, a gift that he sent down to us through the Jewish people. For a congregation that includes non-believers, it can lead to an invitation to salvation.

Psalm 98. This psalm is a fine example of poetry used in the service of worship. Theoretically, it can be preached and linked to the Rogation theme of the calendar, but it is a weaker text for that purpose than Psalm 33 (see below) or some others. The worship theme—God the creator of all who sustains temporal human life—is a necessary position to re-state clearly in a world that so routinely denies it. On the other hand, incorporated into worship with music that reflects the same theme, verse 9 can be used to connect the congregation to the Gospel and Epistle portions.

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1 John 5:1-15. It may be best to see the words of John in this epistle as an application and interpretation of the text of the Gospel. The same themes are echoed, but elaboration upon the themes seems to recognize that distortions of the Gospel text have arisen and need correction. So it is that 5:2 affirms that we (will) love other Christians if we keep the Father's commandments. That obedience to teaching (which assumes the assistance of the Holy Spirit) can never be separated from love is bluntly stated. Of course, one has only to review the Beatitudes to realize this statement simply reflects Jesus' gospel of the Kingdom.

The second paragraph of the reading emphasizes the unbreakable connection between faith and obedience. The identity of the Son of God (v. 5) is verified by the testimony of blood (crucifixion) and water (resurrection). These two witnesses satisfy the requirements of *halakic* law for testimony in court. If one believes that testimony (i.e., trusts that it is true) and acts upon what it means, the result will be eternal life. We would do well to note that eternal life is far more than an extension of mortal life in a better body, but rather the transformation that comes at salvation while still hampered by mortality. That transformation is the beginning of eternal life, the beginning of the obedience that eventually perfects one by the Spirit in readiness for when it is fully realized upon Jesus' return to reign.

John 15:9-17. This text is truncated. It is best expanded to include the familiar metaphor of the vine and the branches that precedes it in the chapter. For the preacher, the metaphor of the vine explained opens the way for understanding and applying the more theological/spiritual section that follows.

The Greek word *meno* that peppers the text is best translated "abide." Jesus explicitly (vv. 5-6) compares the branches' connection to the vine with the word "abiding," going on to add that without that connection there will be no fruit (growth in becoming like Jesus, acquiring the fruits of the Holy Spirit, or being his witness in the world). Verse 9 repeats the word "abide" as the means by which the Father's love, shared through Jesus, can be realized.

Verse 10 makes clear, however, that while the love may be unconditional in the theoretical sense, in the life of the disciple it will not be experienced until conditions are met. That is the meaning of being "thrown away" in verse 6. Easier to comprehend is the certain condition of that love Jesus expresses in verse 10, "keeping" his commandments. None of this language implies that human effort is the path to salvation. That comes through trust (faith) in Jesus' deity (his abiding in the Father), his messianic calling (redemption of the world), and his spiritual leadership and empowerment (through his Holy Spirit).

Jesus' Jewish listeners would not have recognized a faith that did not express itself in behaviors that please God (holiness). As disciples, a well-defined role in Jewish culture, the objective was always not just to learn the teaching of the master but to replicate his behavior. Jesus, through metaphor and plain

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language, said that only through loyalty, as close as a branch connects to a vine, can this relationship be realized.

ACNA Addendum

Isaiah 45:11-25. Paired with Psalm 33, the preacher can teach a rogation lesson on preserving the earth God has given, an entry point of interest to most contemporary non-believers. It can trace back the Christian commitment to being stewards and progress to being stewards of the Lord who created the earth. What are the implications of that for human beings? The gift given, in true Middle Eastern terms, has strings attached; it is given in pursuit of a relationship.

Isaiah 45:22, 23 provides the textual platform to link God's creative power with his offer of salvation. Verse 20 provides the link that it is not just for Israel. The preacher can then take his audience to the Epistle reading and open for them the plan of salvation that begins with God's love for us, moves us into relationship with him through the propitiatory work of his Son, Messiah Jesus, and empowers us to live in that relationship through the obedience that is the "abiding" John teaches.

Psalm 33. If the preacher wishes to focus on the rogation theme, this is probably the best text to use as the main preaching text. It does give scope to take the worship theme of God's creating and saving power and link it with the metaphor of the vine in the Gospel portion. It could lead to an evangelistic invitation. It also lends itself to correcting the unconscious assumptions of city dwellers with the reminder that everything on their tables has its source in a divine person not merely a human one. If that is the case, then the provision of food for life is a gift. It should not be received lightly. Nor should the gift that is the source of the food (earth) be abused as one would not only lose its benefits (like secular environmentalists might emphasize), but it is also an affront of disobedience to the Creator who is the source of the gift.

The text of the psalm lends itself to a sermon that describes the character and power of God, bringing its readers/hearers to an understanding of knowing our place relative to our creator. In a world so driven to make everything about human beings, which will inevitably produce a culture of death, this text is a life-filled alternative.

1 John 4:7-21. As one would expect, this text connects seamlessly to the RCL lectionary portion in 1 John 5 above. But it may be easier to preach it as a supplement to the Gospel as it contains within it an application of abiding in the Messiah. (We probably should be careful to make clear that the Jesus in whom we can abide is the risen, victorious Lord to whom he pointed his first disciples that evening before his death.) The portion appointed is an expansion of the Gospel text: evidence of the love of God is love (*agape*) in the assembly of the redeemed. Verse 10 describes the interaction that connects us to God; it is through faith in the propitiation made possible in Jesus. In verse 12, love for one another is

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evidence that we have entered into that faith relationship with God through Jesus and that he is (mystically) in us. Then John lists the evidence by which a person who has entered into a relationship with God through Jesus can know he or she is abiding:

- Is the Holy Spirit present in one's life?
- Can one confess Jesus as Lord?
- Does one have confidence for the day of judgment (v. 17)?
- Finally (a *redux*), one cannot hate one's brother or sister.

About the author. The Rev. Canon Daryl Fenton assumed the role of executive director for CMJ in Israel in 2019, after having served in the same capacity for CMJ's USA branch. Cn. Daryl previously served as canon to Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America, overseeing mission relationships. He also served as canon and chief operating officer for the Anglican Communion Network, a founding organization of the ACNA. He continues to serve the current archbishop, the Most Rev. Foley Beach, as Canon for the Middle East. Daryl is married to Sandy. They have two grown children, as well as three grandchildren. The Fentons reside in Jerusalem, Israel.