

Easter 6B. May 6, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Acts 10:44-48, I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17. "The Victory that Conquers the World"

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

This Gospel reminds me of the old Beatles' song, "All you need is love," which is why we put that heart on page 11 of your bulletin. We could have chosen a couple other graphics. One said, "All you need is love --- and coffee." Another said, "All you need is love --- and chocolate." 😊 I'd be happy for all three of the above.

During these past few weeks of Eastertide we have read, over and over, the almost nagging and repetitious lessons that we are to love one another. "Love, love, love!" we are told. Maybe these lessons are repeated because God knows we often "just don't get it." How often do we walk out of church nursing the same old grudge, still criticizing the person who isn't living the way we think he or she should, or doing what we think he or she should; still harsh and impatient with our children or our parents; or just quoting a rule rather than studying the nuances of complex situations?

Yes, we resemble that question.

But the phrase that really intrigued me this week as I was reading the three lessons we heard in church this morning was from our second lesson in I John:

“Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” (1 John 5)

Conquering the world means different things to people. The Romans, the Persians, Germany, Japan, Russia, the US, the United Kingdom and other nations have tried over the centuries to conquer the world by military force.

Business executives of all stripes and in all kinds of industries have sought to conquer the world with their product, their software, their influence.

Sports teams, Olympians, all seek to WIN – the most medals, the Super Bowl, the World Series.

But the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> John didn’t mean that kind of conquering, maybe not even that kind of world.

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One Christmas many years ago, Harry’s boss failed to make payroll. Harry was unable to buy his family the presents and the holiday food he had planned. Harry was not able to forgive that boss. Year after year at Christmas time, he would stew over that old injustice, an injustice unfortunately not uncommon even today – especially with day laborers and so-called independent contractors. One year, something changed. Harry was nearing death and setting his affairs in order. He felt a wave of forgiveness wash over him as the Holy Spirit helped him forgive that old boss and give up the long-standing anger. He told me, when Christmas came that year, that it was his best Christmas ever. His faith had helped him to conquer the world of his old grudge, his old sadness.

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Janet’s marriage ended in divorce – not by her choice – but, as her “friends” said, “it always takes two.” Her church told her, when she found a new love whom she wished to marry, that she could no longer receive communion there. Janet remembered Jesus’ words to women – women with whom he conversed, women whose children he blessed and healed, women whom he taught along with the men, women to whom he entrusted the first Gospel message, “Go tell my brothers that I am risen from the dead.” Her faith helped her believe that Jesus would not exclude her from his holy supper of remembrance and forgiveness. Her faith helped her conquer the world of guilt she felt, so that she could embrace the world of joy which a new relationship offered.

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Joan's favorite granddaughter despaired and took her life, devastating her many friends, her family, her teachers, her church family. Joan's friends tiptoed around the subject, not sure what to say. They remembered the old belief, perpetuated by many churches, that people who committed suicide would go to hell. Those thoughts troubled Joan a little bit as well – even though she had long since come to believe that there was enough hellishness on earth that a hellish afterlife was unnecessary and not biblical. In prayer, Joan remembered the words of today's Gospel and words so often found in the biblical record: that God is love, that Jesus calls us friends, that Jesus carried the little children like lambs in his arms. Joan would grieve her granddaughter as a sweet and kind young woman. But Joan's faith helped her conquer the world of despair that threatened to overwhelm her.

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Good friend of Pete Seeger, musician Tony has Alzheimer's. No longer driving, he was becoming increasingly isolated. Lutheran Community Services has a program in Tacoma which connects people with dementia with volunteers like Kellen, a young man in his late 20s, who remembers his grandparents fondly. The two men have become friends, have visited just about every museum in Pierce County; they run errands, talk, laugh and enjoy life. Tony and Kellen's faith have helped them conquer the world of isolation.

In each of these stories, LOVE wins. God's love gives us the faith that helps us conquer the world of our many issues and challenges, our illnesses and our griefs.

In the night in which he was betrayed, the night Jesus spoke the words in our Gospel lesson to his disciples, including Peter, Thomas and Judas, Jesus was aware of the pain and degradation he would endure, the abyss of death into which he would willingly go. He told his disciples that the love which drove him to do this is the love which he and his father share. And he desires to share that love with us. "No one has greater love than this," Jesus tells them, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends." And to take it up again, overcoming death. To bridge the terrible gap between God and humankind and to call us clean, whole, righteous, friends.

Now, says Jesus, do what I command you: Love one another.

We may find people around us unlovable. Left to our own devices, we might have few friends. Although statistics vary widely, a great number of people in our country confess to being lonely. Some call this an “epidemic of loneliness”; others just report that millions of people suffer from “social disconnection”. It’s a life of being “last picked” for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade softball team, last standing at the wall of the gymnasium during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance.

Jesus reminds us, “You did not choose me ... I chose you.” Your lives do not have to feel like that 4<sup>th</sup> grade softball team or that 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance. But they sometimes do.

Someone is sitting here this morning fighting back tears of loneliness, battling depression, or wrestling with a serious problem. This person needs you to be Christ to her. And each of you knows someone who is not here this morning, who needs a word of encouragement, a phone call, a visit, a friend – who needs you to be Christ to him.

We can’t imitate Jesus’ unique and ultimate gift of laying down his life. But perhaps we are called to lay down our lives for one another just a phone call at a time, or an hour of listening at a time. The good word of comfort, the offer to drive somewhere, the loyalty to one another that makes us bite our tongue to hold back hurtful gossip or criticism or argument, the humble apology, the generosity to people in all places who are in need: these are the fruits of love, which you practice as you minister to one another and to your community – as friends. I have seen you in action!

Some years ago I joined a very friendly church, much like Dungeness Valley Lutheran. But, know this, there is nothing quite so lonely as being NEW in a place where everyone seems to know and love each other. That is something to remember as our church membership grows and changes. One day a woman in that church – I still remember her face over 30 years later -- picked up the phone and invited me to a women’s meeting. That phone call and the friendship of those women came to mean the world to me.

“I have called you friends,” said Jesus. By his grace and forgiveness we are given new chances each day – chances to DECIDE to love one another. Jesus overcame the vast distance between God and us. Now divisions between us and our neighbors – across the church, across the

parking lot, across the country and across the world can be put aside. Our faith can conquer the many challenges the world puts before us and we CAN love because he first loved us. Amen.