

Sunday after Ascension Day 2021
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
May 16, 2021
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 Psalm 1 1 John 5:9-13 John 17:6-19

Alleluia. Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!]

We are still in Easter season, celebrating the time that Jesus was with us on earth. We have been experiencing Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances and hearing about the first Christians in the book of Acts. Today we immerse ourselves in another beginning by reading the first Psalm in a book of 150 psalms ...

HAPPY!

Happy are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord.

Law is a reference to Torah, which actually means teaching ... the first five books of the bible are Law, Teachings:

Happy are those whose delight is in the teachings of the Lord!

Jesus himself referred to this idea many times: that we worry about the law, infinitesimal rules, rather than following – no, delighting – finding JOY, in the teachings.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Happy are they who find delight ... in the fullness of living a life with our Lord.

I am happy today to celebrate and honor our high school graduate Riley. The world is wide open to him, and we wish him joy in looking ahead to a world with opportunities that we cannot even imagine. Go with God, Riley, with our blessings, and with joy and hope. Thank you for the many ways in which you contribute to this body of Christ.

I am happy today to celebrate and honor those who came forward to teach in a school year that ended rather abruptly. We give thanks for your dedication in showing up, in making videos, in being present and giving our children (and youth and families) experiences of God through Jesus Christ in many, many ways. Thank you for your ministry.

I am happy today to celebrate and honor our Youth and Family ministries director Lori Hawkins who has continued to show up in an unprecedented year. Lori has prayed, developed, created, and provided all of us opportunities to worship at home in Christ. Lori has provided us many learning experiences here, as well. Thank you, Lori, for your dedication and ministry.

The early followers of Jesus called themselves members of “the Way;” the way of Jesus Christ in the world. We as a faith community are now participants in “The Way” of Christ in this community and the world. Biblically, we read and hear about “the way” in a rather unusual place: within Judaism, in Jerusalem, a city under the rule of the Roman Empire. Christianity is taking a foothold, keeping its hold, within an established faith. Christianity’s existence is a threat to the Roman Empire and to a largely pagan world. It will take courage and strength to bring the

love of God through Jesus the Christ to a world that cares little about religion. We continue in a similar “way” today:

It takes courage and strength to bring the love of God through Jesus the Christ to a world that cares little about religion.

The apostles worked to recover *who* had been lost: Judas. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the apostles brought Matthias into their fold of those who loved Jesus and would carry his message to the world. We know many who seem lost to the church or to the practice of a life of faith. Like those very early apostles and disciples, it will be the work of the Holy Spirit who brings us back to church, not as an institution, but as the living body of Christ who, at The Church of the Redeemer, meets for worship *most often* in a particular place.

We, disciples of this century during a worldwide pandemic, are working to recover *what* we have lost: our usual worship, live vocal music, meeting in person for – everything: family gatherings, funerals, birthdays, school, a night out And we have lost family members, friends, and loved ones to Covid-19 and other illnesses. We have not been able to honor their lives in ways that are most meaningful to us. Still, the Holy Spirit who added Matthias through the prayers of the apostles is still with us. The Holy Spirit works in us and through us to bring the presence and grace of God in all times and all places. We find ourselves happy to see family, friends, and our faith family.

The Center for Disease Control, the CDC, just released recommendations to bring our lives “in the world” almost back to normal. A chart widely available and posted throughout this building, illustrates their recommendations. In brief, those who have been vaccinated are “cleared” in almost all activities and locations. The unvaccinated remain at increased risk in many activities, including attendance at religious gatherings.

This “of the world,” guidance is followed by direction from the local church, the Diocese of Upper South Carolina. Our bishop sent out guidelines and then updated them with the (newer) information from the CDC; our governing authority’s guidance says:

We will continue to wear masks in worship;

Those who sing need to have been vaccinated.

The six-foot social distancing guidelines have been reduced to three feet, meaning we can use every pew and separate ourselves with this reduced distance in everything that we do during worship; and that

Communion is to remain “bread only” in the absence of a safe(est) alternative.

We can expect our guidelines for gathering to continue to change and improve. The bishop will provide an update around June 8th.

Why do we honor more stringent guidelines than those “of the world”? As the church, our consideration goes beyond “mask or no mask.” We as Christians recognize that our responsibility as a faith community and a church are bound by the vows that we have made in baptism:

To seek to serve Christ in all persons, and to love our neighbor as ourself,

To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, and

To respect the dignity of every human being.

Our congregation includes those who are not vaccinated – by choice, demographic, immune compromised, and co-morbidities. We welcome everyone. We have visitors, and neither I nor

anyone here needs to “police” vaccination status. With over 40% of adults fully vaccinated in the US, that leaves a large population still vulnerable to coronavirus.

Clergypersons and leaders everywhere struggle to keep our congregations safe; this pandemic has heightened and multiplied the complexity of the challenge. I ask you to offer kindness, as you have been doing, in respecting the decisions made by your rector, bishop, and neighbor: friends and strangers alike. We all grieve the many things that we lost over the past year; we consider what we might choose to leave behind and what we will choose to bring forward. Leave behind harsh judgment and gossip. Bring forward a spirit of generosity, compassion, and welcoming our neighbors. Judge no one in their grief. Give thanks for the grace poured upon us by God at all times.

Followers of “the Way” were sent out into the world, as we are still. After worship in this building, we are called to go out and tell the Good News. We are bolstered by this beautiful prayer of Jesus to God – Jesus is praying for us!

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Jesus does not ask that we be taken out of, the world, but that we are kept safe in this one. The kingdom of God has been brought here through Jesus. This prayer is our context of how we are to BE in this world in which we no longer see the physical Jesus. We are protected. We are loved. We are given the word of God, of truth, by God through Jesus.

And so we are sent into the world to proclaim truth. We are given a message to spread beyond what is comfortable for us ... outside of Jerusalem, outside the gated walls, and into a world that thinks it has no need of Jesus. We are called to feed those who do not even know that they are hungry: hungry for the word of God, hungry for hope, hungry for a way through a culture that is still reluctant to embrace one God.

We are followers of the way of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at work, guiding us, guarding us, breathing new life into our days. Throughout our journey, be happy. Live in joy and light and wonder, God’s way. Ask in what way you and I and the community of the Church of the Redeemer is called to carry out the work of Jesus in this world, today. God, show us the way.