

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Year C**

**[RCL] Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35**

“By This Everyone Will Know That You Are My Disciples”

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord from the heavens! Praise the Lord from the earth! Let us praise the name of the Lord, for God’s name only is exalted, God’s splendor is over earth and heaven. Amen.

Today’s readings situate the early church within the Jewish culture of first century Judea. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles depicts Jesus’ early followers as observant Jews and the beginnings of the Church as rooted within Judaism struggling to define what this new way of life means for them.

The writer of the Revelation to John is also situated within the Jewish tradition and in these writings; we have an example of Christian visionary literature built on the foundations of Jewish apocalypses. A revelation or apocalypse is generally a first-person narrative in which the writer relates one or more visions about the future and/or the heavenly world. The image of the divine throne and the precise layout of the heavenly city contain echoes of Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 40 – 42, while the new heaven and a new earth and the absence of weeping and crying are echoes of Isaiah 65. Indeed even the reference to the holy city Jerusalem supports an essentially Jewish frame of reference. The text as a whole is a glorious act of worship, telling a story of God’s enduring presence in the salvation offered by Jesus Christ. The vision ends on a note of hope and faith.

In today’s gospel, Jesus announces his impending death to his disciples and offers comfort and instructions for how they should behave when he is gone. John the Evangelist takes pains throughout his gospel to distinguish the Jewish followers of Jesus from “the Jews,” those who have not accepted Jesus as the Son of God and path to salvation. “You will look for me,” Jesus says to the disciples, possibly to tell them of new ways in which they will find him after his departure. New ways such as what Peter discovered when he went to the Gentile household of Cornelius. Jesus emphasizes how his followers are to behave when he is gone in the famous words of John 13:34-35 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

These instructions form the basis of pastoral care and service in Christian life and community, from the time of the earliest Christians forward. Jesuit professor Bruce Morrill, in his book *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death*, writes:

“What distinguished the followers of Jesus and successive generations of Christians was their outreach to the poor and sick, the practical love they

demonstrated in openly forming fellowship groups (local churches) that actively reached out in service to the poor, the hungry, and the sick.”

An element of early Christian practice that impressed pagan observers was their shunning of social boundaries in caring for the sick and needy in times of trouble.

These early Christians were called to follow Jesus’ instructions: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

In fact, according to Rodney Stark, author of *The Rise of Christianity* and an authority on the sociology of religion, poor Christians in the ancient world were healthier and happier than their poor pagan neighbors. Christians cared for one another. They took up collections to support their elders and orphaned children. They offered each other simple nursing care in epidemics. They offered strong community in chaotic times. Stark writes in *Christian History Magazine*:

“To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity and hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate fellowship. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.”

These early Christians were called to follow Jesus’ instructions: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Can we say the same today, of our churches, in our cities? Are we taking care of one another? Offering charity and hope? Providing fellowship to newcomers, strangers, orphans and widows?

The beautiful language of the King James version of today’s passage from Revelation contains the words: “And 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.” How can the promises of Revelation be applied in a pastoral context? How can we aid and comfort one another? Certainly, we can’t take away all sorrows, old age, chronic pain, death. We are unlikely to alter the path of armies or the destruction of natural disasters. Can we bring a note of hope and faith in the midst of pain, chaos, despair? Can we reach out to victims of destruction and exile?

Certainly what we can do is reach out to our neighbors, remembering that the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles as well as the circumcised. We can love another. We can assure one another that we are all integral parts of a living community, a community both within and without our church walls. By worshipping together, praising God as our Jewish and early Christian forebears did, we join in community and are strengthened in faith as we are soaked in trust and love for one another. In liturgical worship, gathered in Christ’s name, we form the basis for worshipping God in ethical service. These manifestations of God’s glory are distinct yet vitally related works of the same Holy Spirit. Our liturgical worship is both an end and a means. Our communities can stand as a witness to our neighbors of our spiritual commitment and joyful determination to love and serve. We are sent out by the Holy Spirit to love one another, to pastor to one another, to reach out to those whom we may serve, in ways great and small.

As the body of Christ here and now, we are called to follow Jesus' instructions: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Go in Peace. Remember the Poor.

Amen.

*Written by Susan Butterworth*

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