

John Sampson
"There Are Never Endings, Only Beginnings."
Text: John 14:15 – 21
Preached at KVCC
May 17, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

It's begun.

The reopening has begun.

On Friday, the first tentative steps towards reopening the economy in this region of New York State began. Construction projects will resume. Non-essential retail businesses will be allowed curbside or in store pickup. Local government offices will start to reopen this week. We're taking our first tentative steps into the next chapter of the Covid19 story.

And we're able to take these first steps because the North Country has met the seven health requirements identified by the state to ensure a basic level of safety and preparedness allowing us to restart portions of our lives, which have been shuttered since the end of March when the pandemic began tightening its grip over our state, and our country.

I don't know if you're like me, but I feel thankful for this moment. To me it seems like progress. In New York State, the epicenter of the pandemic in the US, the number of deaths is down, the numbers of hospitalizations and new infections are down. And now, instead of closing, the first signs of opening are popping up around us. Hope seems a little closer now than it has in a while.

But even as businesses and offices begin to open like the buds on our spring trees there is so much uncertainty, so much worry and anxiety around us, so much grief that we haven't allowed ourselves to fully feel and process. There is hope, but it is hope in the context of a pandemic that threatens to come back even stronger if we, as a society, don't remain focused on doing the things we need to do to keep it at bay.

Some of you may have been on Thursday night's town meeting held on Zoom in which Joe Pete, and members of our community, outlined the guidelines for businesses to reopen. This Tuesday, part of our Church Council meeting will be dedicated to a conversation around how we will begin thinking about reopening our church.

And as we begin this very important conversation, a conversation that will be more difficult and more fraught than the decision to close ever was, we hear the words of Jesus in this morning's reading. Words he shares with his friends and disciples telling them that he will be leaving them, but that they should not worry. Because although he will be gone, they will not be orphaned. God will be with them in the gift of her Spirit.

But this gift is a conditional gift. It is a present given based on the acceptance of an invitation to love – not Jesus the person, but Jesus as present in his follower's embrace of their teacher's commandments.

At this moment when we as a church begin to map out how we will reopen, we need some help. This is a moment to pray for God's Spirit to visit us, to come among us and our hearts, and help us discern the right way forward. And the passage we hear today tells us that God's spirit will be among us if we remember and enact Jesus's commandments.

Jesus didn't command us open our church doors as quickly as possible in the midst of an ongoing pandemic .

We have no record of Jesus ever commanding his disciples to throw out Zoom and start having all church meetings in person after our region met the state's seven requirements.

Jesus never told us to reopen as fast as possible, but then again he never told us to drag our feet coming back together.

What he did command us to do is to love God with everything we've got, and to love each other in just this same way.

God's Spirit, which we ask to be present in our discernment of when and how to reopen our church, is caught up in the way we live into our love for each other. It is in this experience of love that we meet Christ, and we meet God, and we welcome God's spirit. It is in love that we will be able to discern our way forward. It is in love that we must answer the tricky and complex and gray, all-to-gray questions that we will have to address in the next days and weeks, and maybe months or even years ahead of us.

This is where the rubber meets the road in our faith. This is where the idea of love has the possibility of becoming something real and tangible.

I'll share with you something I have been saying throughout the past week in various meetings I've been having with members and friends of our church. I know that many of us look at how communities around our nation are reopening, and we shake our heads, and we wish things were different, and we're concerned if not outright scared at what the future may hold for our nation. We have no power over what happens in Arkansas, or in Georgia, or in Texas.

But we do have power over how we reopen this church. We can reopen our building, and begin to meet again in person, in ways that feel informed and safe. We can develop a reopening plan that makes sense to us.

But what our spiritual ancestors challenge us to do is to make all of our decisions based on love – for those who are over 65, for children, for those who are suffering with the mental and spiritual effects of isolation, for those who have underlying health conditions or live with family members that do, for those who want to sing hymns in our sanctuary once again.

You see there are many kinds of love, and love doesn't come in a one size fits all option. To operate from a place of love is not easy when those who you want to love don't always understand love in the same way. But that's exactly what Jesus is asking of us at this moment, to love one another in our complex and varied selves.

And if we do, our spiritual ancestors promise us that we will not be orphaned in figuring out how we go about reopening our church. God's Spirit, the one that Jesus calls the Advocate, will be here among us, helping us, inspiring us, meeting us in our need.

Amen.