

Study Guide: May 6, 2018

Readings: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Theme: Abiding in Joy

As we enter the sixth Sunday in Easter, we are drawing closer to Pentecost, the day the church celebrates the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit upon the congregation. If you've been following the study guides and the lectionary readings, you may have noticed that there are two themes at work to prepare the church to receive God's blessing of the Spirit.

The first is found in the readings from Acts, a preparation for our "corporate" worship. Here we are shown how to gather as a community, what laws and rituals are part of our public profile, and so on. Acts is best described as the history of this new church filled with Jews and Gentiles alike, who now call themselves "Christians." This is not so much a new religion, but a return to the way of life as God had intended since the beginning of time.

The second theme is more of a personal blueprint or instructions on how we are called as individuals that make up this new way of literally living and loving in accordance to the way Jesus commanded. I chose to focus our Eastertide messages in the gospels and epistles because the way New Church is set up, and the way we gather to worship, seemed more appropriate and inviting. It seemed to me that we must first discover our individual place in God's kingdom so that we can then go on to gather; sharing this good news not only in our private words but in our public deeds as well.

Suffice it to say, both are important to our salvation and growth – both as individuals as well as a gathered community. Both lives begin in the sure and certain truth that we are loved by God. And we are commanded to share that love with one another. As individuals and as a church, WE ARE LOVED! AND WE ARE LOVE!

We are both the receiver of God's love and the givers of it to others. This is how we will bear the good fruit of eternal joy; how God's name is glorified for all to encounter; and how heaven and earth become one.

READ: Acts 10:44-48

This is a momentous occasion – the Pentecost of the Gentiles – and a major event in salvation history; unveiling the total breadth of God's saving intentions of the whole human race. It seems Peter sees that God desires everyone to receive "the sacrament of enlightenment," or "Holy Baptism," so that they might come to participate in the death and resurrected life of Jesus Christ.

Q: How has God enlightened you to not only receive but to share the Holy Spirit?

Q: What does this passage invite you to do as a church and as a person?

Prayer starter: Most Holy God, enlighten my understanding with your Spirit so that I may do your will today, bringing glory to your name and honor to your Son, Amen.

READ: 1 John 5:1-6; Ezekiel 36:23-27

In this passage, we see John weaving together faith, love, and obedience to God's commandments in an inseparable bond. The most endearing part to me is the idea of being children of God. But it also outlines the basic foundation of our faith and salvation; which seems to date back long before John was called to follow Jesus.

Q: What words or verses speak to your heart, or help you find joy in a world that often seems devoid of any?

Q: How is this passage inviting you to share the good news with others?

Prayer starter: Heavenly parent, how grateful I am to know that you loved me long before I knew that I needed your love. How might I pay that love forward today in Christ's name?

READ: John 15:(1-8) 9-17

In this passage, Jesus is calling us into a much deeper relationship with Him – beyond teacher/student or master/servant. His desire is a close friendship, one where we live and abide in the same heavenly love and complete joy that characterizes the relationship between Jesus and God. If we want to have joy like Jesus', we have to learn to love one another just as Jesus has loved us—in humility and self-sacrifice. This is where we bear the good fruit. God is love. Love is relational. Therefore to find true love and everlasting joy, we are called to enter into a relationship of friendship with Jesus, where our motivations become internalized and we take ownership of our path as a way of love.

Q: Which of God's commandments is Jesus inviting you to take to heart and put into practice today, for the sake of finding your joy?

Q: How is this passage inviting you to share the good news with others?

Q: Jesus is also calling us to friendship with one another modeled after His own friendship with us. How might we foster true bonds of friendship in person or with our online church community?

Prayer starter: Loving God, help me today to be the compassionate heart and hands of Christ. Just as he gave me your love and joy, may I go and do also with everyone I encounter. Amen.

Slow Read: Psalm 98

As you meditate on these words, listen for the music of praise being sung in the heavens; it might be nothing more than the noises of life, but where there is life, there is God.

Prayer starter: Lord God, open my eyes to see, and my ears to hear. My heart to love, and the love to forgive. Keep my close to you, and Christ close to me so my joy may be complete. Amen.