

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish
of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on May 10, 2020 (Easter 5 Year A)

I started my first club—my first *two* clubs, actually—when I was in the 6th grade. The other members were some of the other girls in my class. Most of us sat together at the same cluster of desks in Mrs. Dobrick’s classroom. We called ourselves the Save the Whales Club, although, at some point, while the membership remained static, we became the We Help People Club.

I’ve always thought of this story as a story about my innate passion for building community. It’s a story I told in my ordination process as an illustration of why I was called to the priesthood, and what I hoped that priesthood would look like. But I’ve started to think about it in a new way. In the summer between 5th and 6th grade, we moved to a neighboring town. For almost all of my life, we’d lived on the same block. My oldest friend Erik lived on the other side of the block. My brother and I hung out in the garage with our landlord across the alley, who gave us peanuts, who welded us a seesaw and paid us to do yard work. And we carpooled with a bunch of the other neighborhood kids to the weekly children’s program at the Baptist church.

When we moved to Elmwood Park, there didn’t seem to be any kids our age nearby. I started 6th grade at a new school, a school where I didn’t know anyone, except for my younger brother, which in my mind at that moment definitely didn’t count as an advantage. And on top of that, I was a very awkward child. Even my closest family members would tell you that I was painfully shy. It’s true that I care about building community. But it’s even more true that I was building what I so desperately needed. I was aching for community. I was aching for belonging. Most of all, I was aching to be loved.

That ache to be loved is so raw and so human. And I’ve sat with it, it’s this passage from today’s Gospel that I’ve found myself returning to again and again. It’s probably familiar to you because it’s a favorite at funerals, and for good reason. It comes from the last supper, from Jesus’s conversation with the disciples after they’ve eaten, after he has washed their feet. Jesus’s spirit is troubled, and begins to tell them the hard truth about what’s coming-- That one of them will betray him. That he is going somewhere, and they cannot come with him. You can imagine the disciples’ confusion, anxiety, and sadness. The disciples do not yet fully understand, but this is the last time they will lay their eyes on this Jesus, the earthly Jesus, before death and resurrection change him in ways that will make it hard for them to recognize their friend. And as we will mark in a couple of weeks, they will lose him again, watching as the risen Jesus ascends, disappearing from their sight and their grasp, the promise of the Holy Spirit surely seeming like cold comfort. A few years ago, a member of my church asked a poignant question that has stuck with me. Why couldn’t Jesus have stayed? Why couldn’t we have known Jesus in the way that the disciples know him? If he loves us, why did he have to leave us?

It’s the disciples question, too. Peter gives voice to it, asking, “Lord, where are you going? Why can’t I come with you?” These questions have a new poignancy this year, in this time when we are so acutely aware of how much it matters, what a profound difference it makes to have the people we love physically present with us. We ache for it.

It’s exactly to that ache that Jesus now speaks. That ache we feel now under quarantine. That ache we feel at funerals in the fresh absence of the person who has died.

The ache the disciples feel as they begin to understand that Jesus as they have known him is leaving them.

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also."

It sounds and feels like Jesus is leaving them behind. But Jesus tells them that his leaving is actually his coming. It seemed to the disciples that the incarnation, God becoming flesh and blood, Jesus' walking and talking and living among us, was the closest that God could come to us. But on this night, Jesus tells them that God has been preparing a way to come even closer than the incarnation, closer even than the touch of skin to skin. Through the resurrection and ascension, God has been preparing a place for each of us to dwell within God's own self, a way to be not just alongside us but united to us, enfolded in God's very being. Jesus is leaving only to come again and take us there, stitching together our being and God's being, heaven and earth, until you can no longer tell where one ends and the other begins. Jesus is making it so that we will never be apart, so that that love will present to us always.

Last Friday was the feast day of the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich. Julian lived through a time of war and plague. In the midst of a life-threatening illness, as she prayed with a crucifix, she experienced visions of Jesus, who revealed to her this very thing-- that God "wraps, clasps and encloses us so as to never leave us." Her experience, and increasingly my own, is that God's love reaches to the depths of our need. That it is enough.

Julian wrote that the biggest obstacle for us is trusting and relying on that love. We have learned, through painful experience, to be wary. There is sometimes a voice inside of us telling us that if we let ourselves really believe and trust that God loves us, it will let us off the hook. That if we let ourselves believe in that love now, while we are still a mess, while the world is still a mess, it will somehow lead to us caring *less* about all of the places and people crying out for compassion and justice. But God does not hold out on us, and this is not what accepting and understanding God's love really does for us. Take a moment to remember a time when you've really known that you are deeply loved. Has that been true? Has that made you less loving, or more? And so what would it would be like for you if you could fully trust and believe in God's love for you?

We hear this Gospel at funerals, but it is not just about some future time. It is also true now. You don't have to wait to let God love you. Jesus is coming to you now. The ache to be loved is an ache God is answering with a love that is enough-- enough to fill us, enough to hold us, enough to change everything. Our work, with God's help, is to let it.