



Office of the Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

**2009 Churchwide Assembly Service of Holy Communion**

Friday, Aug. 21, 2009

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2a, 9-18; John 15:9-17

Sermon by the Rev. Christine A. Timm, Olivet Lutheran Church, Sylvania, Ohio

As I arrived in Minneapolis earlier this week and crossed the Mississippi river on my way downtown, I could not help but remember my first significant experience with the "Big River" over 35 years ago. My parents, both career educators, planned an annual epic two-week vacation for our family, 500-mile-a-day journeys which took us to over 30 states in seven or eight years. For a few years, we traveled with a trailer, and then a truck camper, but one year we began our vacation aboard a houseboat as we cruised up the Mississippi River from Dubuque, Iowa, to Prairie du Chein, Wisconsin.

It was one of the most restful vacation periods we ever enjoyed ... slowly making our way up the mighty Mississippi, stopping for a swim here or there, or for some fuel and ice cream at a marina along the way.

It was on this journey that I began to understand the importance of being able to read a map or a nautical chart, as I watched my Dad sacrifice his 12-pack of beer to the local who led us out of a maze-like slough back into the river. It was on this journey that we not only got to watch other vessels move through a lock, but at Guttenberg, Iowa, were able to experience that event firsthand.

Those four days of living on a houseboat planted a seed in me. I dream that my husband and I someday make our home aboard the 1969 mahogany cruiser that we have been restoring. I'd like to **abide** there, for a few months, if not longer. But "where would he put all his tools?" And "where would I keep all my books!?!"

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.* (John 15:9) Yesterday Bishop Gregory Palmer led us into Jesus' Farewell Discourse in John. He reminded us that Jesus, *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* (John 13:1b) Now, after eating supper with them and kneeling like a servant to wash their feet, after urging Judas to be on his way to his task of betrayal, after one more exchange with a brash and boastful Peter, after speaking pointedly about his imminent departure from them and assuring Thomas that because they knew him they already knew the way, after promising the Holy Spirit and peace to them all, Jesus describes the distinctive relationship that he has with them.

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. Make your home in my love ...* live in the love that began in my Father, which I have shared with you. Jesus is pouring out his heart to his disciples, baring his soul to them there in the Upper Room. He is casting the vision into which he is inviting them to live and love once he is gone from them.

In love, Jesus is sharing with his disciples everything he has heard and received from his Father ... but they are not getting it. Jesus describes how he is the vine and they are the branches, how they are set apart to bear fruit—fruit that will last. But I suspect that the Eleven, having eaten and drunk their fill of the fruit of the vine, are sitting there with attention spans sorely compromised. They don't have a clue as to what their Lord and teacher is doing. I imagine Thomas was distracted, wondering, "Where did Judas go?" Matthew was calculating what they owed the man who had prepared the room and meal for them. Simon Peter was doing a not-so-slow burn—indignant that Jesus could ever think he would deny him! And James and John were probably daydreaming about sitting at Jesus' left and right hands in glory.

Still enslaved to hopes and dreams they brought to the table they shared with Jesus, still abiding in their own expectations of what Jesus' Messiah-ship **could mean for them**, the disciples are slow to perceive Jesus' fervent desire that they anchor their hope and their lives in his love.

But lest we be too hard on them, I think it is safe to say that we can be slow to catch on too. We are enslaved by all that we cling to. It's hard for us to agree enough to live that closely together, to be friends—to trust Jesus to love us and the other—to abide in him so that we might bear the fruit of loving service. Nonetheless, in that Upper Room and here in this place.

*Love is flowing like a river, flowing out from you and me.  
Flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.  
— Traditional Shaker Hymn*

God's love is flowing through Jesus to us. Here in the Word, here in the bread and wine, he is present as promised. Because we cannot grasp the joy of abiding in his love, he comes to abide with and love us. Jesus, one with God, loved by God, is a conduit for God's ever-flowing river of love and grace. And with that very same love, Jesus has chosen to love us, no matter what it will cost.

*Love is flowing like a river of water and blood from his pierced side ...*

Jesus chooses to become the friend of sinners. With the very love that the Father has loved him, he now chooses to love his own, going to any length to make and keep them and us as his friends. Indeed, he goes to the cross, laying down his life for his friends (v. 13) that they may have his life, the very kind of life that the Son has with the Father. *No one has greater love than this.* This is the kind of love that is flowing when we gather in remembrance of Jesus' death - we are not here by our choice, but by Jesus' choice.

Love is flowing like a river pouring over the heads of the three thousand baptized on Pentecost morning, pouring over the head of the Ethiopian eunuch, pouring over the heads of Lydia and all her household, pouring over your heads as well.

This is the kind of love flowing from Jesus' empty tomb and Spirit-filled disciples. It is a river of love producing the fruits of repentance and creating community.

*Love is flowing like a river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. — Revelation 22:1-2*

This is the kind of love God pours out upon a people and a creation that God refuses to forsake. It is a holy love that breathes new life and new hope into our world. God's love is not merely something we access or tap into when we feel like it; God's love is where we get to abide and make our home. It is where we find our life. It is the means by which we bear fruit. God's love flows to us and through us, making aliens into citizens (Lev. 19), strangers into neighbors, servants into friends. As God's love flowing through Jesus and you and me, and we lay aside all that would keep us from abiding in Jesus' love, the weak are made strong, and the poor become rich. To abide in Jesus' love and to love one another means our life together is characterized not by our disagreements, but by the holy way in which we make space to disagree. This love is flowing like a river whose source is the very heart and will of God, because Love is and will always be what God does to us, for us, and through us.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Don Miller writes, "Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something (or someone) before you can love it yourself." Have we watched God love the alien, the stranger, the servant, and the one who disagrees with us to the point where we can love them ourselves?

*May you abide in Jesus' love, may Jesus' joy be in you, and may your joy be complete.*