

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Ascension Sunday**  
**Sunday, May 21, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: John 17:1-13 (NRSVUE)

Theme: New Life Breaks Forth in Joy

[prayer]

Today we conclude our spring worship series, *New Life*. When we began this series six weeks ago, the trees were just beginning to bud, and flowers had yet to bloom. The birds were building their nests. The earth was still mostly gray and brown.

But today she is lush and green! The flowers are blooming; the baby birds have hatched. We rejoice in the light and warmth of the sun, planting our gardens and anticipating the abundance of summer.

Springtime reminds us that God's miracle of resurrection is not limited to Easter Sunday. It is woven into the fabric of Creation. For these great fifty days of Easter, we have celebrated some of the signs of new life breaking forth in our world – turtles and fish, butterflies and frogs, birds of every feather. We have considered the spiritual meaning of these signs: The arc of God's Creation bends toward new life. And when we follow Jesus, our lives bend in the same direction.

Still, this may not feel like the case when we are facing a painful ending in our lives. Can there really be joy and new life on the other side of that pain?

The disciples held this very question in their hearts as Jesus bid farewell to them. In our Scripture lesson, Jesus concludes his teaching to the disciples and turns his eyes to heaven. He speaks intimately with the Father about the culmination of his mission on earth; he outlines his hopes for the beloved friends he is leaving behind. The disciples overhear this prayer. And while Jesus sounds confident and assured, the disciples are confused and grieving. They do not understand that the things that are to come will bring glory to God. They only know that Jesus is leaving them, and it fills them with fear and sadness.

[pause]

The Church began as a small group of Jesus-followers with their eyes turned toward the sky, watching Jesus ascend into heaven and wondering when he would be back. In the earliest days of the Church, the expectation was that Jesus was coming back *imminently*. The first generation of Christians were convinced this would happen before they died.

Two thousand years later and our understanding of imminence has become a little more flexible. We still believe Jesus is coming back soon, but we know God's definition of 'soon' is radically different than ours. Eventually that small group of disciples took their eyes off the sky and looked around them and realized that they were now the body of Christ in the world – Jesus's ministry was now their ministry. So, while their hearts remained fixed on the things of eternity, their eyes began to focus on the mission at hand: God's kingdom come, God's will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.

Jesus teaches that God’s kingdom will come when we know God. Remember that knowing God is not a cognitive action; it is not our knowledge of the Bible or our mastery of doctrine. Many people have head knowledge *about* God but still do not *know* God. Because to know God is to have a loving relationship with God and (crucially) with our neighbors, as well. God’s kingdom is birthed here on earth as our love for God and neighbor grows. These two relationships go hand-in-hand: As we learn how to love God, we learn how to love our neighbor; and as we learn how to love our neighbor, we learn how to love God.

Jesus’ mission was to show us what that loving relationship looks like. In his prayer to the Father, Jesus said, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me” (v. 6). In other words, while he was on the earth, Jesus made known through his loving relationship with God and with the people he ministered to what it looks like to love God and love our neighbor. And he also taught that eternal life is experienced in the loving relationships that unite us to God and to each other.

Nancy J. Ramsay, a professor emerita of pastoral theology, writes this about knowing God in the way that Jesus teaches: “‘Knowing’ describes a powerful, active, confessional, and intimately relational claim on our lives. Knowing God is an experience that draws [us] into a new reality in which the new order that will be shaped eternally by God’s vision for love and justice and service can also be realized in relationship and communities now. Knowing God will be evident in our obedience to love, the singular commandment of this Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

[pause]

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the World: Year A, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (2010). 540.

In Methodism, today is Heritage Sunday – the day we remember our founder, John Wesley’s, conversion to the Gospel. Wesley’s conversion story is not especially dramatic; while listening to a reading of Luther’s Preface to the Romans, Wesley felt his “heart strangely warmed” and he knew at last that he was set free from the tyranny of sin and death.<sup>2</sup> But this quiet experience of God’s grace 285 years ago launched a movement within Christianity that remains a global force for good. Methodists have always believed that we are not saved by grace only so we can one day escape this world and go to heaven. No, we are saved by grace so that we can help bring about the new reality, the new order, the new life that the Gospel’s message of love commands. Heaven will be our eternal reward, but heaven begins here on earth. As our church’s vision statement reads:

*We believe that the love of God and the call to justice, compassion, love, and mercy extends beyond our walls and into the community. We seek to understand as well as demonstrate what the kingdom of God is really about.*

It is through understanding and demonstrating the kingdom of God that we can experience the joy that Jesus speaks of when he says “May my joy be made complete in them” (v. 13 paraphrased). The joy that Jesus experiences is the joy of his union with the Father. This joy will be made complete *in us* when we are united in new and eternal life with God, our neighbor, and all Creation. As he prepared to be glorified through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus prayed, “Now I am no longer in the world, but they [my followers] are in the world, and I am coming to you [Father]...Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (v. 11).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-aldersgate-day>

Jesus's great prayer of unity for the Church begins here. This prayer fills me with equal parts inspiration and sadness. I am inspired by the experience of unity that Jesus desires for each of us and for the Church – the unity of relationship that God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit share with each other. But I am also sad because this beautifully divine experience of unity seems so far from our reach. This month I participated in the work of approving thirteen local church disaffiliations from our United Methodist connection. These churches have left over theological and polity disagreements with our denomination. Even though I acknowledge that the process of disaffiliation was necessary to stop the harm we have been causing each other, it was painful and distressing to take part in dismembering the body of Christ. As we said goodbye to those thirteen faith communities, I felt like the disciples felt as they listened to Jesus say goodbye: Sad, afraid, alone. I wondered: Can there truly be new life after such a painful ending?

I worship a God of resurrection, so my heart declares in hope, *Yes! There will be new life*. That new life will not look like the Church of the past. It will look different, because it will be new! I do not understand how our apparent disunity fits into God's cosmic plan for the Church, but I believe that God can and will redeem even this. And so, in the spirit of Jesus's prayer to the Father, I pray that our church will be transformed in obedience to the law of love. I pray that this transformation will joyfully unite us to God and our neighbor. I pray for protection from the things of this world that seek to kill our joy in the Gospel: fear, hatred, evil, despair. I pray that we will reclaim our heritage and our commitment to seeing God's grace at work on earth as it is in heaven. I pray for a future with hope.

[pause]

We conclude our series with this featured creature: The bald eagle. As you may know, not long ago this beloved bird was endangered and facing extinction. Through careful attention and unity of mission, the bald eagle was restored to a healthy population level and eventually delisted. Every winter we get to enjoy the sight of these majestic creatures nesting and feeding here in Coeur d'Alene. They are a reminder of God's redeeming and resurrecting power at work in creation. New life is breaking forth: In unseen places, at the table, in the midst of change, in the stories of God's creatures great and small. New life is breaking forth through the Spirit! New life for you and me; new life for our church.

Amen. Let us stand now in body and spirit, and joyfully raise our voices to God.