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**From the Pulpit: May 22, 2022**

Fifth Sunday of Eastertide—Children's Day

**The Reverend Christine V. Hides**

John 14:23–29

*A Collective Murmuration, V: Murmuration of Heart*

Today is Children's Day. For about seven decades, third graders at Kenilworth Union have learned the Ten Commandments, 23rd Psalm, the Beatitudes, Lord's Prayer, Greatest Commandment, and Books of the Bible by heart. This year is the first year since 2019 that we have been able to gather the whole group together in the sanctuary to present the Bibles. I am especially proud of this year's class. It was not an easy year. They started learning these verses last fall when we were still meeting outside for Sunday school! Thanks be to God for the creativity and perseverance that made this milestone possible.

The Bibles we receive as children are special. This is mine, the one my parents gifted me at my baptism when I was just a couple months old. It is the one I used to lead Bible study with my sister and stuffed animals when I was nine. When I became a parent, I placed it on my daughters' bookshelf. One of them left a post-it note that says, "My favorite story" by the Samaritan woman at the well.

This is the Bible that I held when I was ordained as a deacon last fall, open to Micah 6:8, "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God," a verse that will forever remind me of you, my church family at Kenilworth Union. Tucked inside my Bible were notes from my first grade teacher, Mrs. Brown, my children, my pastor friends, and a poem written by my grandmother. These faith love notes, folded like winged birds in the pages of

scripture, are reminders of a wonderful flock of people who have been a part of my life with God.

The last few weeks Katie Lancaster and I have been preaching about flocks of starlings. Starlings are a kind of bird that looks like a star, known for flying in huge groups that dip, and swirl, and turn together. A flock of flying starlings is called a murmuration. The huge group of people who helped the third graders to write God's word on their hearts this year are like a murmuration of starlings, flying and swooping together in a beautiful way. Thanks be to God for parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, high school youth, church leaders and this entire congregation which is committed to supporting children's ministry.

"He knew God so well  
he often called God,  
'Father,' and the temple  
his 'Father's house.'"

Let me tell you a story about the words third graders wrote on your heart this year, which are guideposts for understanding other parts of the Bible:

Once there was a man, who lived about 2,000 years ago, who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things, that people began to follow him. Jesus, the man they followed, knew the scriptures well, the sacred texts we call the Old Testament today. He knew not just the Ten Commandments, but all the law and the words of the prophets. He knew the psalms which sing of God the good shepherd who cares for us even in the darkest valleys very well. He knew God so well he often called God, "Father," and the temple his "Father's house."

The people that followed Jesus, and especially his close friends, the disciples, saw him eat with people no one else would. They saw him heal people by coming close to them. They heard him tell parables about a kingdom unlike any they had ever heard of or visited. They heard him preach the Beatitudes on a mountain. These blessings showed the people how God saw the world differently: the poor and meek will inherit the earth. The hungry and thirsty will be filled. The peacemakers will see God. Jesus taught them to pray the Lord's Prayer we pray every Sunday.

Jesus' teachings about the earth being more like heaven was not the kind of thing that the Roman rulers and the religious leaders wanted people to hear. Imagining the world as Jesus did made regular people question the way people in power treated children and those who were sick or who had no money or family. This is why Jesus was arrested and killed. But even killing Jesus could not stop God's love from working in the world. When the women went to the tomb on Easter morning, it was empty.

Jesus is risen, alive with us today, but in a different way. Kind of like the way you change the light in a candle. When the light that is all in one place is changed, the smoke goes into every place. Jesus, the light of the world, is still with us, especially in the bread and the wine, but in a different way.

When we read the New Testament, which writers began creating about 50 years after Jesus died, it seems that Jesus knew what he was saying would lead to trouble and his arrest. In the Gospel according to John, the disciples ask Jesus questions like, "Where will you go?" "Will you show us who God is?" and "Why don't you show the whole world who you are?" Isn't it comforting to know the disciples have a lot of questions? That means that God is ok with my questions, and your questions, too.

Now I am going to read John 14, a part where Jesus answers the disciples. Pay attention to the gifts that Jesus mentions:

*If anyone loves me, they will carefully keep my word and my Father will love them—we'll move right into the neighborhood! Not loving me means not keeping my words. The message you are hearing isn't mine. It's the message of the Father who sent me.*

“When we read the New Testament, ...it seems that Jesus knew what he was saying would lead to trouble and his arrest. In the Gospel according to John, the disciples ask Jesus questions like, ‘Where will you go?’”

*“I'm telling you these things while I'm still living with you. The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. The Spirit will remind you of all the things I have told you. I'm leaving you well and whole. That's my parting gift to you. Peace. I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don't be upset. Don't be distraught.*

Third graders, on the day you receive your Bibles, I want you to pay attention to four gifts that Jesus gave to his disciples, and to us:

First, God's love is a gift. Jesus came “right into the neighborhood,” to show and to tell everyone about God's love. Jesus didn't just talk to the powerful people; he told the people that sometimes get forgotten. God's love is close by, as close as the good shepherd of Psalm 23 is to the

sheep. God's love is a place we can call home forever. God loves each and every one of you. Always.

Second, God's word is a gift. Generations of third graders have written these same Bible verses on their hearts so that they always know the gift of God's word. We learn the 10 Commandments and the Greatest Commandment. God's word shows us the way to Love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourself. The Bibles we receive as children are special. Keep it, treasure it, and continue to read it. It is a gift that helps us to be followers of Jesus.

The third gift that I heard in the Bible reading was the gift of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the red Sunday, Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is our friend, and our advocate who will continue to remind us and teach us about God's word. Remember when you thought you might not be able to learn the Beatitudes but then you did? Remember when some of the words didn't seem to make sense but then they did? That is just a little example of how the Holy Spirit helps us to read and understand God's word. When you open your Bibles, remember the Holy Spirit is there with you. And, your parents and church friends are here, to help, too.

The last gift that Jesus shared is the gift of peace. One of the best parts of being a minister is that I get to spend time reading the Bible with people of all ages. As we study the Bible, people share their faith stories. They talk about some hard times in their lives: times when they felt homesick at camp, or scared because a family member who was sick, or worried because they got a bad grade, or sad because terrible things happen in the world. When people share their faith stories they talk about how even when hard things don't go away they still know God's peace.

“God’s peace is the feeling of knowing that we are not alone. God is with us. When we feel God’s love and closeness even in hard times, that is God’s peace.”

Sometimes the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 helps us feel God's presence. God's peace is the feeling of knowing that we are not alone. God is with us. When we feel God's love and closeness even in hard times, that is God's peace.

All of these gifts, the gifts of God's love, God's word, God's peace, and the presence of the Holy Spirit are gifts we experience together as a church community, that big flock of people who try to tune their hearts to God, creating a kind of murmuration.

Third graders, let the Bibles I am about to present to you be a reminder of the many people who help you to know God's word. Let this Bible remind you of God's gifts to you and be a sign of God's love for you.

[Watch the children receive their awards by passing important milestones](https://subsplash.com/kenilworthunionchurch/media/mi/+gt6vry8)  
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**—Prayers of the People—**  
**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

O Majesty, Mercy, and Mystery;  
may the week culminate in prayer and praise  
may the day build toward observance and devotion.  
may this moment draw us into  
the raw vulnerability of your presence.

All week long, we fabricate harsh  
borders between one another and you.  
and somehow our desire for justice and mercy freezes  
and a fog of distraction forms across our vision.

And now, in this sacred place, we ask: let the walls fall  
let frozen yearning melt and set us on a clear path.

Unclouded, we can see one another.  
Unimpeded, we can welcome you,  
you who is already here in our midst.

It is attention, kind regard,  
awareness of one another that we so long for.  
Our openness forms a doorway into awe, the center of  
our body radiating your presence.

We reclaim the patience needed to lay bare our lives  
to you.

So hear our prayers:

For the worries that sit deep  
in the chambers of our bodies.

For our own aches.  
For our reluctance to do  
or say what we know to be true.

For our immobilization,  
unable to open wide.

For our most dear, our beloved,  
our kin, our clan, our chosen family.

For their anxiety, puzzling within.  
For their pain.  
For their impossible futures.  
For their deepest joys shared.

For their thriving.  
For connection to them, eye to eye,  
voice to voice, hand in hand.

For our community. For any outer or inner lack.  
For the risk and win of participation.  
For the reclaiming of collective understanding.  
For our nation and the world.

For the places where there is fear, bring purposeful  
calm. For the places where there is violence, bring  
healing peace.

For the places where there is complacency,  
bring a churning movement toward justice.  
And we name aloud in our hearts the places and people,  
the situations, and longings of our most tender lives.  
Lord hear our prayer. Our Father.... Amen.