

First Lesson: Acts 11:1-18
Second Lesson: Revelation 21:1-6
Psalm 148
Gospel Lesson: John 13:31-35

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2022

“Better Days Ahead”

Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz

I want to try a little exercise. It might seem unusual and be a step outside our comfort zones. If you are willing, please attempt it. So, let's begin. Please start by closing your eyes. Try not to fall asleep. After we are finished, and you notice that the person next to you is, gently nudge them awake.

But keep your eyes closed. Clear your mind. Whatever you brought in here today, whether it's your summer plans, a to-do list, or whatever happened last week, just put that off to the side. Take a deep breath and exhale. For a moment, take a break from your emotions - any anxiety, frustration, or depression. Take another deep breath and exhale.

Now picture yourself on a beach, in a meadow, or somewhere that is calming. Think of your happy place. You don't have to share this with anyone. Maybe, the sun is shining, and you can feel a gentle breeze. You're just standing there, and everything is perfect.

You don't have any concerns. You're healthy, you're financially set, and life is good. Around you is your family. Your children and grandchildren are playing together. Your parents are laughing as they talk to your grandparents, or great grandparents, who died long ago.

Picture your brother or sister is there. Imagine you are reunited with a long-lost family member. Just take a second and imagine being overcome with joy. Take another deep breath and exhale.

Now, we are going to go a step further. Imagine you see a former friend standing in front of you. This person could be someone with whom you fought. Maybe it's not a friend; perhaps it's a family member, stranger, or teacher. They are someone who caused you great pain.

But as you are looking at them, you can't remember how or why they hurt you. Instead, you are now healed, leaving no trace of what happened, and the other person is forgiven. Whatever they did to you is nothing more than a faded memory, and they are no longer capable of doing anything like that again. Perhaps there is someone you caused pain to standing there, but all their wounds have melted away, and all they do is embrace you.

Now open your eyes. Again - whatever you saw - you don't have to share it with anyone. Perhaps you enjoyed that exercise. Or, you're glad it's over. Possibly it was nice until I asked you to think of a person who hurt you. That could've been the most challenging thing to picture. Maybe we don't want them in our happy place because we expect people will get what they deserve.

Sometimes we take solace in never seeing others for the rest of our lives. We parted ways, and the relationship is over. That can be so hard to imagine when it comes to what God will do in the future.

It's difficult to picture God creating a new heaven and new earth which includes them. It could be difficult to comprehend because it conflicts with our expectations.

In our second reading for this morning (evening), this is what John's Revelation shared with us when he described what would happen when the first heaven and first earth passes away, and a new heaven and new earth come down from God. We hear a vision of what the world will look like when everything is reconciled under God's grace or God's unconditional love and favor.

Many of us might not have expected to hear this when we came here today, especially when it comes to the Book of Revelation. For many of us, this is possibly one of the most misunderstood books in Christianity. Typically, when people hear someone mention the Book of Revelation, it is often connected to the end times. It's often linked to natural disasters that conjure up fear and anxiety.

For many years this was what I often believed. However, once I studied this book and realized how it's connected to other apocalyptic literature in the bible - yes, there's more than one - I saw the symbolism. This understanding made it easier to digest. I was no longer fearful of it.

As a result, I learned this book was written for a group of people who were persecuted during the late first century. Basically, it was written to a community or believers who were dying for being Christian. So, John's Revelation was to bring hope to the hopeless. There wasn't a prediction about the end times; there's no rapture or anything similar. This vision was meant to help those people realize there's more to their world than death. They needed to see that the world would be restored, and those things that brought pain and suffering would cease to exist.

As we heard, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying, and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." It's as though John was painting a picture of his happy place. It wasn't meant to cause fear or anxiety but to bring healing and wholeness.

What's even more fascinating about this vision was that God didn't seek to remove God's disciples from this world. Instead, we are told that God comes down and partners with God's people. In other words, what John believed was that a new world would begin in the present moment, and every human being could experience its joy and goodness.

That vision sounds terrific. We long for it. But with everything thing we see and experience, how can this be? How can we experience this new heaven and a new earth in our present lives? Jesus mentioned it right before his crucifixion in our Gospel lesson. We also heard it less than a month ago. So, we should know it very well. He said, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

We can experience this new heaven and the new earth right now in our present lives through loving each other. It's amazing what happens when we live this out, but it's not easy. Sometimes, loving one another is easier said than done.

For instance, take Lucy from the cartoon strip "Peanuts." There's one cartoon where it begins with Lucy standing with her arms folded and a resolute expression on her face. Charlie Brown pleaded, "Lucy, you must be more loving. The world needs love. Make this world a better place, Lucy, by loving someone else." At that point, Lucy whirls around angrily, and Charlie goes flipping over backward. "Look, you blockhead," Lucy screamed, "The world I love. It's the people I can't stand!"

It's much easier to love the people who have loved us first. It's easy to love those who respect us, agree with our beliefs, and look like us. But what about loving those who don't? What about those with different political views, cultural backgrounds, or anything else?

Perhaps that's the type of sacrifice Jesus is referring to before his crucifixion. When we hear about sacrifice, we often think about people giving up their lives for a cause. But what about sacrificing an idea? Or, what about sacrificing a long-held belief? Or, what about sacrificing time, money, or something small? Imagine what could happen if we made those small sacrifices. Picture what we might learn about others. Maybe we could be connected with others on a much deeper level.

Bob Weber, past president of Kiwanis International, told a story about understanding others. The story began when he went to a small town and spoke to a club. Because there weren't any hotels, he spent the night with a farmer on the outskirts of the community.

After the gathering, he went back to the farmhouse to relax. As he sat on the front porch with the farmer, a newsboy was delivering the evening paper. When the boy approached them, he noticed a sign that said, "Puppies for Sale." The boy got off his bike and said to the farmer, "How much do you want for the pups, mister?"

"Twenty-five dollars, son." The boy's face dropped. "Well, sir, could I at least see them anyway?"

The farmer whistled, and in a moment, the mother dog came sprinting around the corner of the house, followed by four cute puppies, who wagged their tails and yipped happily. At last, another pup came limping around the house, dragging one hind leg. "What's the matter with that puppy, mister?" the boy asked.

"Well, Son, that puppy is crippled. We took her to the vet, and the doctor took an X-ray. The pup doesn't have a hip joint, and that leg will never be right."

To the amazement of both men, the boy dropped the bike, reached for his collection bag, and took out a fifty-cent piece. "Please, mister," the boy pleaded, "I want to buy that pup. I'll pay you fifty cents every week until the twenty-five dollars is paid. Honest, I will, mister."

The farmer replied, "But, Son, you don't seem to understand. That pup will never be able to run or jump. That pup is going to be a cripple forever. Why in the world would you want such a useless pup as that?"

The boy paused for a moment, then reached down and pulled up his pant leg, exposing that all too familiar iron brace and leather knee-strap holding a poor twisted leg. The boy answered, "Mister, that pup is going to need someone who understands her and help her in life!"

This is the new heaven and the new earth God calls us home to belong to. It's a place where we learn to understand one another beyond what we see on the surface. It's a place where death and hate are washed away. It's a place where we merely love one another.

I don't know about you but that's an incredible vision. It's an incredible vision, because yesterday I just learned that in my hometown of Buffalo, New York, there was another mass shooting. A young man from Binghamton, New York, which is five hours away, drove up to the Buffalo area to slaughter ten people because of their race.

My friends, if we can just learn to love one another, and if we can teach that to the next generation - not just my generation - there will be a day when this new heaven and new earth happens and things like this will cease to exist. We have the opportunity and the ability right now to do something about it. This is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

I need to hear this good news today, that God provides that hope when there is so much divisiveness, hatred, and anger around us. We need to hear this good news when events like this just happen. We have plenty of opportunity and Christ puts it right before us. Love one another as I have loved you. Just love one another. We can do that by respecting each other and learning about one another. Maybe we can build some relationships.

Regardless of how imperfect we are and, yes, we are going to mess up. But as we just heard, God wants everyone to be a part of this place. It's not about getting people into heaven or bringing people to Christ. Instead, it's about taking Christ to people. Maybe, that how we can prevent those bad things from happening. It's about being witnesses to the love of God, found in Christ's death and resurrection, so all will experience God's new creation.

- Amen