

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Easter  
May 25, 2025 Yr C  
St. Mary's Barnstable  
The Rev. Michael J. Horvath  
Gospel: John 14:23-29

So. Let's just name it: this is a goodbye speech.

Jesus is saying goodbye. He's had three years with these followers. Teaching, healing, walking, eating, laughing, weeping, throwing some serious shade at the religious establishment, and lifting up the people the world had pushed down. And now, he knows what's coming. He's headed toward the cross. So he starts preparing them for life after he's gone.

And he says this strange and beautiful thing: "Those who love me will keep my word."

And that's not him laying down a condition for love. It's not like "Do this right or I'll revoke my affection." This is Jesus, who washes the feet of people he knows will betray him. This is Jesus, who forgives people while they're in the act of killing him. So no, it's not a threat. It's an invitation.

He's saying: "If you love me, then live like me. Keep my word. Let it shape your bones and your days."

And what is that word? It's not complicated—but it is hard. It's the Gospel he's been living all along: Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Tell the truth. Give your life away. Trust that God's kingdom is breaking in, even when it feels like everything's breaking down.

And now, Jesus is saying, "I won't be here in the same way anymore. So it's yours now. You are the body. You are my presence in the world. You keep the word."

It's a wild idea, right? That the Good News doesn't retire when Jesus ascends. That it actually intensifies. Because it's no longer just Jesus doing the work. It's the whole messy, grace-soaked, human family of God.

And let me tell you, that's not something the Church figured out in the last few decades. It's not a postmodern thing, or a postcolonial thing, or even a post-

enlightenment thing. From the beginning, the Church has been trying to answer this question: How do we live like Jesus when Jesus isn't physically standing next to us anymore? What does it mean to keep his word in Rome? In Jerusalem? In Europe? In Africa? In the Americas? Under empire? During plagues? In slavery? In war? In peace?

And let's not kid ourselves -- it's been messy. We've gotten it wrong a thousand times. But sometimes, by the mercy of the Holy Spirit, the Church listens well. Sometimes, she catches a glimpse of what Jesus meant. Sometimes, we say something or do something that feels like the Gospel cracking open in real time.

And that's what happened recently when Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe said *no* to a request from the current administration to help resettle a group of white South Africans—Afrikaners—based on the claim that they were being persecuted in their home country. That they needed refuge. That they were victims of racism because of the color of their skin.

And a core part of The Episcopal Church saying no was that the claims were built on a false narrative. A narrative that ignored the brutal, state-sponsored oppression of Black South Africans under apartheid. A narrative that tried to flip the story -- to make the people who held the power into the victims when that power started to shift. A narrative that has been debunked by academic and economic study after study, by human rights advocacy groups, and by economic oversight groups that track wealth inequality worldwide.

And Presiding Bishop Rowe, with the support of our church, said: "No. That's not what we're going to be part of."

And thank God.

This wasn't a knee-jerk political move. It wasn't reactive or trendy. It wasn't about left or right, red or blue, progress or tradition for tradition's sake. And no, it wasn't decided by one guy in a pointy hat in some cathedral corner office with incense and ego.

This decision -- and so many others the Episcopal Church has made -- was the result of generations of theological wrestling matches. And I do mean *wrestling*. Like Jacob-with-the-angel kind of wrestling. Like limping-away-afterward-but-with-a-blessing kind of wrestling.

We are a church that has discerned its way forward in community, not in isolation. Through councils and synods and conventions. Through dissent and debate and deep,

gut-level prayer. Through cradle Episcopalians, the newly converted, queer folk, people of color and ex-evangelicals and clergy in clericals and laypeople with questions that wouldn't let them go.

So The Episcopal Church's stance on full inclusion, on racial justice, on climate stewardship, on gender equity—these are not fads we picked up at a theology conference. They are the fruit of centuries of trying, failing, repenting, and trying again to follow Jesus -- not just because his words were beautiful, but because we believe they're true.

Because we have a history. A long one. One that includes both moments of beautiful, Spirit-led courage -- and moments we'd rather repent for. This is the same church that once baptized enslavers and denied women the pulpit. But it's also the church that changed its mind. That repented. That amended its ways. That said, "Wait a minute. Maybe we didn't get that quite right. Maybe the Spirit is still speaking."

And she is.

The Holy Spirit -- as Jesus promises in today's Gospel -- "will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you." And that remembering part is hard. Because it means unlearning some things we were taught in the name of God but that had nothing to do with the love of Christ. It means letting the Spirit remind us not just of the words Jesus said, but of the people he touched. The bodies he welcomed. The systems he overturned. The tables he flipped. The peace he breathed into locked rooms full of scared disciples who didn't know what to do next.

So no, this isn't a political statement. It's a faithful one. A painfully honest, Spirit-wrestled, Jesus-remembering kind of statement. And it's one we've come to -- not on a whim -- but on a long, crooked road paved by saints and sinners and people who dared to believe that the Church isn't a museum for the perfect, but a living, breathing community where grace is practiced, truth is told, and love gets to work. And we do this in conversation with the Holy Spirit.

And let's talk about that Spirit for a second. She doesn't just whisper comfort when we're sad, though I, for one, am glad she does. She also calls the Church out. She reminds us of what Jesus actually said, not what we wish he'd said. She disrupts us. She reorients us. She refuses to let us off the hook.

And this Spirit, friends, is what Jesus leaves us, along with the peace she carries.

But when Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,” he didn’t mean the peace of silence, or politeness, or pretending everything’s fine. He meant the kind of peace that comes from truth. The kind of peace that disrupts the systems that feed on lies. The kind of peace that comes alive again when it feels like all has died.

And living that kind of peace is not easy. It will mess with your comfort. It will disappoint people who want the Church to just stay in its lane. It will make you look political when you’re really just trying to be faithful.

But if we believe Jesus, if we love him—then we keep his word. We don’t build fences around his message to keep it from offending the privileged. We let it loose. We let it judge us. And, hopefully, we let it change us.

Because the Church isn’t just here to be nice. We are here to keep the word. To live the Gospel. To follow Jesus, not just to the cross, but through it -- into resurrection.

And resurrection is never a return to the old status quo. It’s not comfort. It’s not nostalgia. It’s new life. And it demands new eyes, new hearts, new commitments.

So let the world spin its narratives of fear. Let it reward the powerful. Let it try to sell us a peace that isn’t real.

But we will keep his word. We will stand with our siblings around the world who are telling truth to power. And we will let the Spirit teach us how to love like Jesus loved.

Even now. Even here.

**Amen.**