Easter 6B. May 5, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Acts 10:44-48, I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17. "The Victory that Conquers the World"

[9]As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. [10]If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11]I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.
12 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13]No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. [14]You are my friends if you do what I command you. [15]I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. [16]You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. [17]I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The Sermon

This Gospel reminds me of the old Beatles' song, "All you need is love". We could say, "All you need is love --- and coffee." Or "All you need is love --- and chocolate." 😊 I'd be happy for all three of those.

During these past few weeks of Eastertide we have read, over and over, the almost nagging and repetitious lessons that we are to love one another. "Love, love, love!" we are told. Maybe these lessons are repeated because Jesus and the Gospel writers knew we often "just don't get it."

How often do we walk out of church nursing the same old grudge; still criticizing the person who isn't living the way we think he or she should; still harsh and impatient with our children or our parents; or just quoting a rule rather than studying the nuances of complex situations? How often do we choose death over life?

One phrase that intrigued me this week as I studied the three readings we heard in church this morning was from our second reading in I John: "Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that <u>conquers the world, our faith.</u>"

Conquering the world means different things to people. The Romans, the Persians, Germany, Japan, Russia, the US, the United Kingdom and other nations have tried over the centuries to conquer the world by military force.

Business executives of all stripes and in all kinds of industries have sought to conquer the world with their product, their software, their influence.

Sports teams, Olympians, all seek to WIN – the most medals, the Super Bowl, the World Series.

But the writer of 1st John didn't mean that kind of conquering, maybe not even that kind of world.

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One Christmas many years ago, Harry's boss failed to make payroll. Harry was unable to buy his family the presents and the holiday food he had planned. Harry was not able to forgive that boss. Year after year at Christmas time, he would stew over that old injustice, an injustice unfortunately not uncommon even today – especially with day laborers and so-called independent contractors. One year, something changed. Harry was nearing death and setting his affairs in order. He felt a wave of forgiveness wash over him as the Holy Spirit helped him forgive that old boss and give up the long-standing anger. He told me, when Christmas came that year, that it was his best Christmas ever. His faith had helped him to <u>conquer the world of his old grudge, his old sadness.</u>

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People who face nagging brokenness might remember Jesus' words to people with whom he conversed, whose children he blessed and healed, women whom he taught along with the men. They might come to know that Jesus would not exclude them from his holy supper of remembrance and forgiveness. Faith helps us <u>conquer the world of guilt.</u>

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Joan's favorite granddaughter despaired and took her life, devastating her many friends, her family, her teachers, her church family. Joan's friends tiptoed around the issue, not sure what to say. They remembered the old belief, perpetuated by some churches – not this one -- that people who committed suicide could not enter heaven. Those thoughts troubled Joan too. In prayer, Joan remembered the words of today's Gospel and words so often found in the biblical record: that God is love, that Jesus calls us friends, that Jesus carried the little children like lambs in his arms. Joan would grieve her granddaughter as a sweet and kind young woman. And Joan's faith helped her <u>conquer the world of despair</u>.

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Some of our Monday guests enjoy not only a shower and hot lunch and clean clothes, but together you and they help one another conquer the world of isolation.

In the night in which he was betrayed, the night Jesus spoke the words in our Gospel lesson to his disciples, including Peter, Thomas and Judas, Jesus was aware of the pain and degradation he would endure, the abyss of death into which he would willingly go. He told his disciples that the love which drove him to do this is the love which he and his father share. And he desires to share that love with us. "No one has greater love than this," Jesus tells them, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends." And to take it up again, overcoming death. To bridge the terrible gap between God and humankind and to call us clean, whole, righteous, friends. Thus, Jesus conquered the world of death. Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

Now, says Jesus, all this is conquered so that you can do what I command you: Love one another.

We may find people around us unlovable. Left to our own devices, we might have few friends. Although statistics vary widely, a great number of people in our country confess to being lonely. Some call this an "epidemic of loneliness"; others just report that millions of people suffer from "social disconnection". It's a life of being "last picked" for the 4th grade softball team, last standing at the wall of the gymnasium during the 8th grade dance.

Jesus reminds us, "You did not choose me … I chose you." Your lives do not have to be like that 4th grade softball team or that 8th grade dance. But they sometimes are.

Someone is sitting here this morning fighting back tears of loneliness, battling depression, or wrestling with a serious problem. This person needs you to be Christ to her. And each of you knows someone who is *not* here this morning, who needs a word of encouragement, a phone call, a visit, a friend – who needs you to be Christ to him.

We can't imitate Jesus' unique and ultimate gift of laying down his life. But perhaps we are called to lay down our lives for one another just a phone call at a time, or an hour of listening at a time. The good word of comfort, the offer to drive somewhere, the loyalty to one another that makes us bite our tongue to hold back hurtful gossip or criticism or argument, the humble apology, the generosity to

people in all places who are in need: these are the fruits of love! You minister to one another and to your community – as friends. I have seen you in action!

"I have called you friends," said Jesus. By his grace and forgiveness we are given new chances each day – chances to love one another. Jesus overcame the vast distance between God and us. Now divisions between us and our neighbors – across the church, across the parking lot, across the country and across the world can be put aside. This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith." Our Spirit-given faith can conquer the many challenges the world puts before us and we CAN love because he first loved us. Amen.