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## A Vast Goodness

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2021*

*John 15:1-8*

It seems to me that we are living at an inflection point in history. It is a kind of cosmic crossroads, a juncture where things could go in many different directions. It is a time when much that had been hidden has been made known, and stories that had been told and not believed are now being believed, and there has been a collective listening and yearning and waking up that makes things possible that had not previously been possible. Some of you may know that in biblical Greek, there are two kinds of time: *chronos* time, which is calendar clock time, and *kairos* time—a time with spiritual significance and meaning. I believe that what we choose to do, and who we choose to be, in this *Kairos* time will have significance far beyond us, will have impact we can't possibly foresee.

Some of what has we have learned in this *kairos* time is a greater awareness of the iceberg we can call systemic racism, but which is related to the underlying paradigms of dominance, fear, trauma and control that lead to other sicknesses in our world. We are starting to wake up to the vast extent of this iceberg, far below the visible tip at the surface. As we've learned about all this, including the church's role constructing racism, I've heard some folks from St. John's

feeling some despair. They have asked, can I even really call myself a Christian anymore? Some of you read Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited* during lent, in which he asked the very real question: what, if anything, does Christianity truly offer to “people with their backs against the wall”—to the disinherited of the earth? Thurman uses his own profound experience as a Black man in America to find in the original Jesus the means by which the oppressed can retain their sense of dignity and self-respect even when the entire nation constantly undermines that dignity at every turn.

But I am sensing that many folks who are white are effectively asking Thurman's question, on the other side of the coin. What, if anything, does this faith have to offer to those of us who were born and have lived on the side of the oppressor? Can we disentangle imperial Christianity from the person and teachings of Jesus enough to be led to repentance, healing, and liberation—in a way that truly makes a difference?

So we are at an inflection point. And into this crossroads comes Jesus' words from today's reading in the Gospel of John. Jesus is giving his final teachings to his disciples, the same evening he will later be betrayed and arrested, the day before he is crucified. They too were at an inflection point in history, though none of them knew it. And into this time Jesus says, Abide in me, as I abide in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. He is using a natural metaphor to describe the most intimate union imaginable. He doesn't say, be my disciple as a hobby or temporary quest for self-help. He doesn't say,

read my teachings and try to follow them after I am gone. He says, stay with me. Remain with me. Abide in me and with me. He is not talking about transactional discipleship. He is talking about a continual, unbroken relationship in which the full healing presence of Jesus is continually available to the disciples, and vice versa. It's even more incredible that Jesus is talking about this on the eve of his execution. He intends an unbroken abiding with his disciples regardless of the machinations of empire, whether that be the Roman Empire or the imperial forces in our own nation today. The impact of this kind of continual togetherness will simply be fruit. Fruit, of course, is not transactional. Fruit by definition has the seeds of future life in it. Bearing fruit is closer to having a child or planting a garden than it is having measurable outcomes in a business plan or coming up with a program.

How can we come to meet and know this original Jesus, perhaps really for the first time, in a way that makes any difference and brings any healing? Jesus lived a radical love, healing, and liberation. He spoke of a forgiveness and a mercy so profound that it quite literally excluded no one, not even the Pharisees, not even the tax collectors, and certainly not the poor and the disinherited among whom Jesus made his home. So it makes sense that where these things are— healing, liberating love, a vast transformative mercy—Jesus will be also. We have been learning how to see and tell the truth about all the hurt, all the harm that has happened. We need to keep doing that. But there is something more we are invited to do. It's to meet the original Jesus and see what healing he is up to despite the empire,

despite the terrible things that have been done in his name. We can move about our lives paying spiritual attention for the fruit that tells us Jesus is present. We can learn to recognize healing when we see it, and throw all our weight into participating in that.

Most of you have by now heard that a group of powerful leaders in North Minneapolis, Don & Sondra Samuels, Pastor Kelly Chatman, Brian Mogren and others have been hosting a virtual healing prayer tent since the trial of Derek Chauvin began, which will continue until the anniversary of George Floyd's death on May 25. They have invited an interfaith gathering of all races and ages to pray every single day for healing our city. Hundreds of people gather daily, someone offers a brief reflection, and then everyone holds silence for nine minutes and 29 seconds, the amount of time Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd's neck. Every day that terrible violence, that sadistic indifference, is immersed again in the prayer of raw, radical grief and hope, love and healing. Young Black poets and old white mystics and Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams and Buddhist priests and singers and artists and clergy of every kind have offered their bits of love and light and hope, every single day. On Thursday, Episcopal priest and mystic Cynthia Bourgeault offered her wisdom. She said that she had felt, she saw and knew, that this healing prayer tent was making a difference. She said that she could feel the powerful love and goodness being poured into the city through this gathering. She said that we are infusing our planet with Jesus' love, and that we must continue to do so. Of course prayer alone isn't enough. But the power of hundreds of people gathering daily to pray

for healing has begun to work a healing in us. It has connected us with the abiding presence of Christ.

Did you notice that this week, suddenly it felt like spring had truly finally arrived? All of a sudden the bright green leaves popped in the trees, the cold began to give way. For a long time it seemed like nothing was happening, and then all of a sudden spring was here. The spiritual life is the same way. The Spirit has been making us new, empowering us to leave the ways of empire behind and follow Jesus to a loving justice-making, and all this is happening at plant speed. It moves at the speed of a grapevine winding its way around fences and trees and trellises, and suddenly bearing tiny grapes that will gradually ripen. The fruit of Jesus' presence is a palpable goodness and kindness and humility being borne from seemingly nowhere. I see it in small practical miracles showing up. For example, did you know that because St. John's followed the Holy Spirit's prompting to center the work of racial justice and healing last year, we just closed on our mortgage refinance—not with one of the larger banks, but instead with Sunrise Banks, which calls itself a “Social Engine for Good”, a “socially responsible bank, focused on creating financial empowerment for all”? Did you know that we are beginning the slow work of truly cultivating relationships across lines of difference in North Minneapolis and elsewhere? Did you know there is a group at St. John's diligently studying police reform, and planning to educate us before the next elections on what options are on the table? Did you know we just installed LED lights in the sanctuary at last? That there are people from St. John's who are increasingly able to have

kindness and compassion across the political aisle—inviting people into a real conversation deeper than the anger and vitriol? That members of St. John’s have been supporting Minnesota becoming a Sanctuary State that does not allow its resources to be used in support of ICE? That we are working on exploring what reparations might look like for the Episcopal Church in Minnesota? And even within our congregation, I see old relational rifts getting tended. I see love and mercy and humility rising up in ways that tell me the Spirit is messing things up and changing old patterns.

Maybe none of these things are huge in themselves. And we should never make the mistake of trying to see these things like grades a report card. I believe they are the tender sprouts of the new life Jesus is making possible among us, the new branches growing on the vine of Christ’s body. These are evidence that God is making us softer and stronger simultaneously, more humble, more willing to change, more willing to own our stuff, more willing to laugh at ourselves in the process. Like the springtime, it’s beautiful to behold.

All of this exists right alongside the imperial Christianity that built racism. But as we learned last year, followers of the Way of Jesus live, not by the logic of cause and effect, but by the mysterious order of death and resurrection. We are immersed in the death and resurrection of Christ, and so everything is possible. It is true that like Howard Thurman, we must rigorously explore our faith to find the original Jesus, so we can dismantle systems that have caused harm for so long. But that Jesus is and always has been here. We are invited to

abide with him and in him. I invite all of us to surrender deeply to the joy of this new life that is unmistakable, that is growing like grapes on a vine. Amen.