

## Sermon, Lienesch

May 22, 2022 (6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Last Day at St. John's)

Almost exactly two years ago today, I began my time at St. John's. We were a little over two months into the pandemic – a time when most of us were still locked down and scrambling to figure out what was safe, what was not, and even what sources of information we could trust to help us tell the difference. It was a week after George Floyd was murdered at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago. Minneapolis was still reeling from the event and its aftermath, from being thrust onto the global stage as the epicenter of protests over police violence that swept the globe, and we all had only just begun to reckon with our own responsibility and role in this moment. On a more personal level, I walked into to St. John's – or rather clicked into St. Johns on Zoom – not knowing what to expect. What would an internship look like when a church was not gathering in person? How would this moment in our city and our country change the work I had expected to be doing? Was I on the right path in my own discernment about the priesthood? What could I offer and where would I find guidance?

This was a moment when the feeling of uncertainty loomed over me, over St. John's, and over our community like a threatening summer storm cloud.

I think this must have been how the disciples felt in our Gospel reading from today. The reading from John is part what are known as the "farewell discourses," in which Jesus instructs his disciples about how to prepare for the time when he will no longer be with them. In it, he tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit will now be their advocate and guide. No longer will they be listening to his teachings as they follow him around the countryside. Instead, they will need to listen to the voice of Holy Spirit who will remind them of all that he has said over the short time they have had together. Now, this must have been disconcerting to hear. These people, who have followed Jesus so closely, are losing their physical connection to him. No longer will they be able to ask him all their questions about loaves and fishes and fig trees. No longer will they

witness him feeding the hungry, or laying hands on the sick, or stilling the storm over the sea. No longer will their daily lives and work be what they have come to expect.

It must have been a definite moment of uncertainty for them.

However, it was also a moment of great promise. Jesus was assuring his disciples that if they had the courage to listen and to trust in the Holy Spirit, and to support and show love to each other and to the world around them, they had no reason to be afraid. “I am going away AND I am coming to you,” Jesus explains, offering hope and promise in this moment of intense anxiety.

And what strikes me as I think about these complex feelings the disciples must have experienced – these feelings of uncertainty and anxiety coupled with hope and with relief that they would continue to have an advocate and guide – is how it has mirrored my, and our, experience in the last two years.

Because throughout this time of utter “unknowing,” I have seen such promise and love in this church community.

I have seen it in many ways:

I’ve seen the patience and grace given to each other when services went online and we were all scrambling to figure out what “church” could look like at the beginning of the pandemic.

I’ve seen the honesty and courage of this church in conversations about our racial heritage and history and our own complicity in systems of oppression. In conversations that aren’t easy but that people undertook with openness and determination.

I've seen the caring and support among us in the person who without being asked by anyone called to check on members of the church who she knew had asthma when the wildfires were compromising air quality last summer.

I've seen the strong sense of community in the joyful tears that I witnessed from many of you as we were able to have communion together again for the first time since the start of the pandemic.

I've seen the faith and joy evident on Easter Sunday when a member -- surrounded by bells and flowers and loud kids -- told me she felt like she was coming alive again after two years of the pandemic and its restrictions and isolation.

I've seen the generosity, humor, and wisdom of clergy, staff, and parishioners as they have advised and guided me on this path.

And I've seen the heart of St. John's in the complete and utter kindness and generosity this community has shown me, my wife, and our daughter as we came in your doors as complete strangers. You have made us feel so welcome here.

This is still a time of great uncertainty. We still do not know what the future of our world looks like. This church, like all churches, is looking at its future and wondering what the next years will bring. On a personal level, I do not leave here with a concrete idea about what the future holds for my role in the church, whether it be as a parish priest, a chaplain in a hospital or retirement home, an organizer for a faith-based organization, or another role I have yet to discern.

Perhaps some of you are experiencing a similar uncertainty as you think about next steps in your own lives, or in the life of St. John's. For this parish there will be much to think about for the future and many moments of uncertainty we move into the next chapter of this community.

What is clear to me, though, is that St. John's will continue to hold onto many of the things that are so foundational to this place: Finding and honoring the sacredness of all people. Staying focused on the world outside these walls, not just what happens inside this building. Really knowing and loving each other, deepening long-standing relationships and forming new ones, supporting each other through difficult times and celebrating in the joyful ones.

In the midst of both the known and the unknown, I pray that we can all continue to look for the love and the promise around us. That we can trust that Jesus's words to the disciples – that the Holy Spirit is with them and will guide them in the way of love – holds equally true for us. And that we can find comfort and hope when he tells us: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

I pray in thanksgiving for all of you and for this community. I leave filled with deep gratitude for all I have experienced here and with hope for the future of this loving community.

*Amen*