### “You Have Loved Them” Steve Finlan for The First Church, May 29, 2022

**Acts 16:9–15**

9During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. . . 13On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

**John 17:20–26**

20 “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. . .

26 “I will make your name known to them, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Welcome. This is Memorial Day weekend, when we take time to honor those who have given their lives in military service for our country. You may have relatives or friends who gave “the last full measure of devotion,” as Lincoln worded it. And what was the purpose? “That these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” May America continue to be an example of self-government for the world.

Let’s look at the New Testament. It has several different authors, who take several different approaches. The author of Acts, Luke, has many passages that are narrated in the first person plural, not in the Gospel but only in Acts. He gathered reports about Jesus but he never saw Jesus in the flesh, however he was a co-worker of the Apostle Paul. Here he says Lydia “prevailed upon us.” Many scholars believe that Luke was an actual participant in Paul’s missionary journeys, so the “us” is not a fictional one. It seems that Lydia’s initial encounter with the apostles was in a relaxed setting, by the river near the city gate of Philippi, where women gathered to pray (Acts 16:13). We don’t know if these are Greek women, Jewish women, or a mixture. We don’t know Lydia’s ethnic identity, but she is probably named for the Lydians, an Indo-European nationality in western Asia Minor related to the Greeks and, by Paul’s time, speaking Greek. Lydia was a dealer in a luxury item, purple dye, which came from sea snails that lived off the coast of Phoenicia. The production process was costly, so the product was expensive; in many people’s minds, the dye was associated with royalty, the only people who could afford it. This probably means that Lydia and her family were wealthy. In any case, she and her whole family were baptized by Paul and the others, and then hosted Paul and his fellows. The ability to host a group of traveling evangelists implies a spacious home. Lydia is probably either Greek or Lydian by ancestry.

I will avoid going into a discussion of the complexities of Lydian ethnicity, but I will say that the prayer in John 17 makes us think of the *uniting* of ethnicities and groups. Jesus prays for *everyone* who worships God, “that they may all be one,” that he and the Father may live in them, and believers may live in Jesus and the Father (John 17:21). It is a mutual indwelling. Further, Jesus passes on to believers the glory that he received from God (17:22). What is this glory? I believe it refers to a kind of spiritual luminosity or beauty, which is united with God’s purpose. Spiritual beauty and truth have the power to bring peace between ethnic groups.

There’s a great line from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, which says “Look on beauty . . . making them lightest that wear most of it” (Act III, Scene 2). There is a certain breezy lightness in beauty. Whoever carries the most beauty is made light by it.

The peak of Jesus’ prayer is when he asks “that they may become completely one” (17:23). If they have this unity, then the love that God shared with him before the world began will also be shared with them (17:24, 26). Jesus uses his Father’s loving relationship with him as a template for his and the Father’s love for believers. It’s as though Jesus passes on everything he received from the Father: love, glory, and unity. Christian unity is based in divine unity.

This pattern of teaching happens over and over in the late chapters of the Gospel of John. Our love reflects and emulates Jesus’ love, which reflects and emulates God’s love. Our unity reflects the unity between Jesus and God. Our friendship with each other reflects the fact that Jesus said “I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends” (15:15). Although the human race doesn’t seem to realize it yet, humanity is meant to reflect the friendship and love that exists on the divine level. Thus Jesus prays that his believers “may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23).

We already know this, and it is reflected in common speech. When someone is particularly kind and considerate, we say that they are “angelic,” because we think of the angels as reflecting God’s kindness and love. Indeed, angelic reflection of divinity is a worthy concept to retain in our art and our hymns. This process of mirroring and passing on God’s love can be called the never-ending reflecting. Our spiritual inner life also has a divine source.

This is our assignment in life and beyond: to reflect the glory of God, to receive and hand on the love of God, to achieve unity with our fellow believers that emulates the unity between the Father and Son. This is the import of that Jesus saying that otherwise would be misinterpreted: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). It’s not about achieving God-like perfection, but reflecting God’s nature and achieving levels of relative perfection that are possible with our finite nature.

When people fail to find spiritual hope and purpose, and fail to achieve healthy relationships, they can become overwhelmed with suspicion, hurt pride, and other toxic emotions. Many young people feel very alienated from their peers. They lack close friends, and they haven’t developed any spirituality. They can become suicidal or, as we recently saw in Buffalo and in Uvalde, homicidal. We need to develop healthy networks of relationships, and pay attention to young people, trying to help them have healthy community, too. We need to teach and model, for children *and* adults, ways of respectful communication that allow open discussion that accepts differences and stresses openness and *encounter,* where there is no place for bullying, taunting, or harassing. Aren’t we all children of God?

All of these spiritual things are not about perfectionism in the sense of being hyper-vigilant and nervous about never making any mistakes. It’s about plugging into the process of the never-ending reflecting of divine values and purposes. This is what happens when we learn from Jesus. We get to retain our own personalities, while taking on the loving sociality of our founder and pioneer. We each have our own unique walk with God, and we each have a unique part to play in God’s plan here on earth.

We contribute to healthy socialization in our country, when ethnic groups and religions communicate with each other respectfully. Actually it *is* exciting to meet new people and learn about their cultures. It is an essential part of the American experiment. It is a way to act out the prayer that “God mend thine every flaw” (“America the Beautiful”). Writing to a Jewish acquaintance, James Madison praised “that mutual respect and good will among citizens of every religious denomination which are necessary to social harmony and most favorable to the advancement of truth.” Lydia would approve.