

Sermon: Trace Evidence Leaves More Than a Trace

Year C, Easter 6

[Acts 16:9-15](#); [Psalm 67](#); [Revelation 21:10,22-22:5](#); [John 14:23-29](#)

Offered May 1, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

I had been dragging around with a stomach bug for a week before I went to the doctors. I had taken a steady stream of over the counter pills and potions, but nothing was improving my situation. My doctor prescribed six antibiotic pills that fit in the hollow of my hand. And I was all better. Seriously, compared to what I eat and drink in a day, even when I'm not feeling my best, one pill twice a day is barely a trace. Compared to my size alone, those pills were scarcely a 100th of one percent. And yet that trace amount of the right medicine left more than a trace.

The passage from John today is part of Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Jesus has travelled to Jerusalem with his followers. They have broken bread and drunk wine together with him, as we did today. Judas Iscariot has left to betray Jesus to the authorities. That's why the Scripture reading explained that it was another Judas who asked the question, *How is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?* (John 14:22). It sounds like this Judas is asking for the secret handshake, the secret code that only the insiders know.

Jesus' answer? First he says that the people who love Jesus will keep his word. Then he says that the word comes from God. So that's not really how we'll identify Jesus but how we'll identify each other.

Then he says that while he, Jesus, has shared plenty of lessons during his life time, God will be sending the Holy Spirit as an advocate, as a teacher during Jesus' absence. So that's saying that Jesus' teaching will continue in this world, through us and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Then he says that really beautiful phrase, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you* (John 14:27). Jesus tells them to not be afraid and to remember what he has said before he went back to God so they could believe.

And that's the answer to the question about what the secret handshake will be. Now in this season of continuing presidential campaigns, we're beginning not to notice when someone doesn't answer a direct question. But Jesus isn't doing that. He's answering the question, just not the way we expect it to be answered.

Let's walk through his answer again. *Those who love me will keep my word* (John 14:23). Remember that this reading is from the Gospel of John that starts, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* (John 1:1-5).

We catch a reference to light in today's reading from Revelation as well *And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.* (Revelation 22:5).

Last Sunday we spoke about how John of Patmos was offering a description of heaven — not what heaven was *like* but what heaven *was*. Today's reading continues that description. It is here on earth, chaos is no more and God is with all of us always, there is no sense of God being absent.

So let's put those together, that those who love Jesus will keep his word. His word was the light of all people. When the new heaven comes down to this earth, God provides the light and banishes night. So when we keep Jesus' word, we are bringing forth flickers of the new heaven right here on earth. No one's going to interrupt our regularly scheduled programming to let us know that loving God and loving each other makes this a better world.

But here's the question. From last Sunday until right now, how many flashes of light were there? I won't ask you to share, but seriously, how many have there been? If it helps, pull out your phone and look at your calendars or at the photos you took. Take a minute and get a ballpark number. [Pause]

So you've got a number. Maybe it's single digits, maybe it's tens or dozens. So let's see. How about coming around a curve and seeing that enormous bank of daffodils. What about little Jocelyn's face when she sees the ceiling fan? How about the comment your spouse didn't make about being late for supper or playing solitaire? The phone call from your kid when they didn't hassle you about a doctor's appointment? If you and your family shared lists of flashes of light, do you think they would have some to add to your list? And vice versa? Maybe "yes", maybe "no". You could run the experiment on the way home today and see what happens.

Because the small moments are out there, just traces that get swamped in the day to day living that is our lives as we work toward the arrival of the new Jerusalem. Just like the antibiotics that fit in my palm, they can be only traces when compared to the much greater whole, but they have a lingering effect. And before this gets too happy clappy, let me point out that the bacteria that had sent my digestive system into such an uproar were even smaller and even more of a trace than the antibiotics I took to rout them.

In thinking back over the past week, there had to be other flashes you had to pass over, of anger and frustration and ugliness and rage. The Holy Spirit is with us not be sure we notice those trace moments. Because that would mean living with our emotional antennae turned up all the time and vulnerable to the battering we would take from all that is not adding light, not working toward the coming of the Kingdom of God. And we all can list pretty readily how much of that horrible hateful stuff swamps the moments of light we have in this world.

The Holy Spirit is with us to point towards the presence of God with us, right here, right now. Sure the bank of daffodils is a great reminder and I am grateful that the Holy Spirit grabbed me enough that I could see it and make the connection. But when you are sitting in the emergency room, you're not going to see a bank of daffodils. You're going to see earnest and overworked medical and clerical personnel trying to deliver comfort and healing and keep a bureaucracy at bay. The Holy Spirit is there to help you see the presence of God in their work. The Holy Spirit is there to nudge you into offering to watch one of the little kids that the terrified mom had to bring with her. The Holy Spirit is there to nudge you into calling a friend to come and wait with you so you are not getting bad news on your own.

Jesus taught this to his disciples before he left them to return to God. He felt that this should help their hearts not to be troubled. How will we know when Jesus has returned? When the trace evidence that he has been with us all along stops leaving more than a trace behind. When that trace evidence, those little flashes of light in the world become the only thing we see. When the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. (Revelation 21:24). Until then, the Holy Spirit is with us, unfailingly, unceasingly, inviting us to

follow the trace evidence of Jesus' presence with us here, today so we might see how much greater than a trace Jesus is leaving in the world today.