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“The Beloved Community”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

April 28, 2013

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Mold us, make us, use us.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us as you fell on those first
disciples. Open our hearts and minds to your presence around us, in
us, and through us. We pray in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I have already indicated that this is a very special day in the life of our church because of confirmation and baptism. It is the day when we celebrate the connectedness of the lives of these young people: infants through teen-agers. That is not something to be taken for granted in our culture. One of the big problems we face in our community is the presence of so many young people who feel disconnected, who live in situations where they are at risk because they don't have support systems. They don't have people to share visions with them, and so they fall into all kinds of difficulties. We are here today to say that connections with each other and with community and with God are important.

I'm reminded of a story shared with me by Dr. Tom Long, who teaches preaching at the Candler School of Theology. He was, prior to that, a professor at Princeton University. He was also our McPherson Lecturer here at First Presbyterian Church and has been here on several occasions. He tells about serving on the Princeton University Chapel Advisory Council. All of the university chaplains came together with some lay people who were graduates of Princeton, many of them working in the area. They met as an advisory committee twice a year, and they talked about

the state of the ministry among the students at Princeton. At one particular meeting, when it had just barely begun, a long-time graduate of Princeton, who was a lawyer now on Wall Street, said, “I’d like for you to tell me the state of student life here. What’s going on with students at Princeton these days? I’ve been out of touch a long time from university life. Bring me up to date.”

The chaplains looked at each other, trying to figure out who was going to jump in and take the bait. Finally, a woman who was a Methodist minister said, “I’ll take a stab at it. We have a variety of things going on in students’ lives. Some students are engaged in social activities, some are working in trying to make the community better. They are volunteering in soup kitchens and working for Habitat for Humanity. There are all kinds of things going on in students’ lives.”

As she was saying this, she looked over, and the Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Ed Feld, was grinning. The more she talked, the bigger his grin became. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. I was just thinking all the things you’re saying about the students are true. They are in a variety of places. Many of them are doing good things. They are doing service learning. But I think there is one thing they are seeking, and I’m not sure we’re very good at giving it to them. That is a vision of salvation.”

They looked at each other, puzzled. “That’s the Jewish chaplain?” they asked. He continued, saying, “You know, it’s true because if you do not have some vision of what God is doing to repair creation, it’s hard to get engaged and to go to a soup kitchen or build a Habitat house because you have this sneaking suspicion that the world will finally beat you down. If you don’t have a vision of what God is doing to repair creation, it’s hard to get up and be engaged in the life of the world.”

This Jewish rabbi understood the Biblical understanding of salvation. It’s not just, “Are you saved?” It’s not just a transaction between us and God. It is about what God is doing in the world where peace ends war, where food is offered to people who are hungry, where health supplants sickness and freedom trumps oppression. Salvation, in a larger biblical sense, is a word for the divine graciousness that surrounds us, that comes to us in the tight places where our lives are at risk regardless of how we got there or whether we know God’s name. Salvation comes

as an extended hand, sometimes it's a bolt from the blue, unexpected, but either way, it opens a door that seems to be locked. It breaks down a wall that seems to be insurmountable. They are looking for a vision of salvation.

I had the good fortune to meet with the confirmation class this year. We played this game that Marilyn came up with, which I enjoyed—at least I thought I was going to enjoy it although I was a little scared of it at first. It's called "Pastor on the Hot Seat." The confirmands had prepared some questions which they asked several of us who were ordained clergy, and we had a good time talking with them. One of the questions that seemed like a softball question right over the plate was for me to tell them what my favorite Scripture passages were. I had a good time with that, as you can imagine, and they probably got a little bored. I could have gone on and on all day. One of the ones I didn't tell them—I wish I had, but I get a chance to tell you today—is a story that Sarah Finbow read from Acts.

It is an amazing story that happened when Peter, who was a Jew who had been working among the Jews, had started spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were upset. They called him on the carpet and said, "Come give some explanation. You are hanging out with Gentiles, uncircumcised and unclean." Then Peter told them about a vision he'd had. Peter had gone to the house of Simon the tanner in a town called Joppa.

Several years ago, my two good friends and colleagues here in town, Rabbi John Friedman and Bishop Elroy Lewis, and I took members of our congregations to Israel. We had just landed in Tel Aviv, and I walked down the street to the site of Simon the tanner's home. John Friedman came up behind me, and he said, "I knew you'd come here! You like that story in Acts, don't you?" John knows more about our scriptures than we do. I said, "Yes, I've always wanted to come here." He said, "Right!"

Peter was called on the carpet, and the leaders asked him, "Why are you spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles?" Peter told them about a vision he had had. It was a strange kind of vision—maybe some of you have had strange visions. There was an abundance of food placed before him. He was told to eat it. He said, "I can't eat this food because, according to Jewish law, it's considered unclean." The voice in

the vision said, “Nothing that God makes is unclean. Eat the food!” About that time, there was a knock on the door that woke him up from his vision. Two men came and asked him to come over and bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, who were people considered to be unclean and unacceptable to be a part of the religious community. He got up and left Simon the tanner’s home, and the whole history of the church changed on that day. The Spirit of God was working among them, and God spoke, and families and children heard the Gospel and responded. That is what Peter reported to the church leaders. Ever since that day, God’s Spirit has been working among us in ways that people cannot understand.

Last Thursday, when we gathered with the community here to give thanks for the ministry that Carlisle and I have enjoyed here, Carlisle told the story that some of you have heard about the reluctance of Carlisle and my children to leave Atlanta when this church asked me to come and consider being your pastor. She suggested that maybe I would come up here, and if I liked what I saw, then maybe we could do something about it. Secretly, I knew that she thought I just had to get this out of my system. When I came back with a lot of enthusiasm for the First Presbyterian Church, Carlisle put her hands on her hips and said, “Well! I did not know that the Holy Spirit worked through the ACC!” Then she said, “But I know She can, and She does, and She will!”

The Holy Spirit, my friends, works wherever the Holy Spirit wants to work because the Holy Spirit has given us a vision of a community that we can’t control. God’s love is more powerful than any of us. Will the Gentiles have a place at the table? Was it all right to eat with these people, considered unclean? The answer was a resounding “yes” because God is not a respecter of persons. God does not divide people up into rich, poor, young, old, gay, straight, black or white people. All of us are created in God’s image, and the good news, my friends, is that the God we’ve come to know in Jesus Christ is still at work in the world, creating what Dr. Martin Luther King called a “beloved community.” When you become a member of a church, you join that team. You become a part of the “beloved community,” to reach out, to build bridges, to scale walls, to remove barriers.

It was not just about Peter’s vision. It was about the vision of God’s people. They listened, and they were open to this new reality: this God who creates new heavens

and new earths, this God who will never let us go. They didn't say to him, "You are out of your mind! This Gospel is for us and for our kind." Instead, the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to listen and to change. That's what God has done to us. That's what God has done to me over the last 33 years. And God has done it through you. You have taught me about the beloved community: how to live the beloved community, how to spread the beloved community into our city and, indeed, around the globe.

I know of a particular instance. One of our long-time members, a man named Gran Uzzle, owned along with his brother, Uzzle Cadillac and Oldsmobile Dealership. Gran was a faithful member and elder of this congregation. Most of you know we have a memorial garden that was established in 1984 as a sacred place where people can place the ashes of loved ones. The names of the saints "who from their labors rest" are displayed on plaques there. Some of them have their ashes there, others don't.

Gran invited me one day to go with him into the memorial garden. He said, "I want to show you something." We got out there, and he said, "Look at the names on that wall." I said, "Yes, I've known most of these people. They are dear, very special to me." He asked, "Does anything strike you? I'll tell you what strikes me every time I come out here. There are people who are of different ages, different stages in life. Do you see that one name over there? There's George Watts Hill." The Watts Hill family is one of the distinguished philanthropic families in North Carolina. Gran continued: "You see down on the bottom on that third row: there is the name of Richard Vereen. You remember Richard Vereen?" I said, "I knew Richard very well."

Richard was an African-American who grew up in Andrews, SC, until he was drafted and served in the US Army in Vietnam. During his tour of duty, he became addicted to drugs. In his mid-thirties, upon his release from service in the Army, he settled in Durham. As he struggled valiantly to overcome his debilitating illness, Richard joined our congregation and was an active member. When a seizure took his life, we held his funeral here. Many of you were here. He had no family anywhere else, so we were his family.

Gran looked at me and said, “When I come out here, communing with George Watts Hill and Richard Vereen, there is no question in my mind where I am—I am in church.”

I’m in church. I’m in that beloved community that God’s powerful spirit can create and make. It is a vision, my friends, that sustains us. It means we are connected to all of God’s children. The beloved community stands in stark contrast to all kinds of segregation and all the cultures of enmity that divides and separates us.

Friends, as never before, we live in a time where there needs to be a faithful witness to God’s beloved community. That’s what this vision enables us to be. That’s what this vision has enabled us for the last 33 years to work on together. The vision is alive because God is alive. The vision is well because there are people like you, people like the saints who have gone before us, who dared to see that vision, who dared, as Peter did, as John on the Isle of Patmos did in prison, to see a new heaven and a new earth where there is no crying and no weeping, and to long for and to move forward toward being a part of God’s vision. It’s the kind of connection that can keep you grounded and give you hope and direction.

A favorite story of mine came from Anne Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies*. I may have told it to you before—that’s what happens when you get my age: you start repeating stories. Someone once told me that repetition is a good teacher. The story is about a little girl who lived in a large, urban community. One day, she was thinking about school and not paying attention to where she was. She looked up, and she realized that she was lost. She began to cry. As fate would have it, a patrolman was riding down the street and he saw her and could see she was distressed. He pulled over, and he got out of the car and said, “Young lady, can I help you?” She said, “I’m lost, and I don’t know how to get home.” He said, “Tell you what we’ll do. You come get in my squad car, and we’ll drive around. When you see something that’s familiar, you point it out to me, and then we’ll go from there until you find your way home.” She got in the car, and they drove around for a few minutes. Then she said, “Hey! Over there! There is my church! There is the

church where I belong! You can let me out now. I can find my way home from here.”¹

Connections show us who we are and whose we are and how to get home!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999, p. 55