

Easter 6—Year B
Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
I John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

What a week. What a *powerful* week. In the wake of **last week's shootings**, we have seen **our community come out and show up and pray and offer comfort**. Some made their way to **King Street a week ago Friday** to bear witness to the procession as the bodies of the officers were brought home to **Boone**. Others gathered in prayer across denominational lines at **Alliance Bible Fellowship on Wednesday evening**. Many made their way to **Holmes Convocation Center on Thursday** for a **community-wide service honoring Sgt. Ward and Deputy Fox**, extending solace to their families and the law enforcement community. Others held a **wide and compassionate space around the Ligon, Glass, and Barnes families**, and others still have held a **wide and compassionate space around Isaac**, making sure that **his humanity is not lost** in all of this. Some have shown up **physically and publicly**; some have been doing **quiet work behind-the-scenes**; for some, **their prayer has been their offering**. *Many hearts* have stood in that tender space of extending compassion in many directions at once *knowing* that there is layer upon layer of complexity to what has unfolded in our community.

It goes without saying that **we are a small town**, and something like this touches *all of us*. This past week, I have received some **tender, tender emails speaking of murders and suicides that happened in their families long ago**. And I am so keenly aware of just how many of *our families* live with mental illness and/or addiction in those they love.

If nothing else comes of this week, let us **speak of these things in *our* lives with the compassion we extend to any other disease that affects us**. Let us **take away the sting of stigma that so many feel**. Let us **check our impulse to extend easy answers where there are none, and instead, do the harder work of bearing witness with our presence, simply sitting with another in the pain, powerlessness, and confusion that so often come with these illnesses**.

And I am aware that **the trauma of last week is yet *another* trauma in a year full of traumas**. **COVID, racism, gun violence, climate change, mental illness and addiction and too few resources, loneliness and isolation, societal and political division—each of these full of trauma in their own right**. **Add to that *personal* traumas unknown to others, and add to that the loss of rituals and patterns and routines that normally ground us when our world falls apart—it's a lot. It's a lot.**

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations have been reflecting on trauma this past week. The **Friday Book Study** has chosen a book about **healing collective trauma** for their next round. *In one way or another, we keep coming back to trauma.*

On the night before he died, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. The air in that room hung heavy. I don't think the disciples could anticipate the depth of the trauma that would unfold the following day on the cross as their beloved friend died a violent death. And *it isn't just the*

physical death that undoes us when death comes too soon, too young, too abruptly, too violently—it's the loss of hopes and dreams that hurt our soul too.

But on the night *before*, Jesus tried to do a little preemptive soul work to equip them for what lay ahead.

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

There is so much here for us. In a time like this, it is so hard *to know* what to do, how to show up, what to say, where to engage. *We want to help, but how?* It can feel *overwhelming*. The disciples had so *many* ways to go, so *many* commandments to follow, and Jesus clears *all* that away and just brings it down to one—“Love one another as I have loved you”—that’s it. Abide in love, extend love.

Jesus goes on, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

Jesus has called *us* friends and invited *us* into a *circle of friends*. *This isn’t about* obedience and obligation, like a servant to a master; *this is about* laying down your life for your friends.

Sometimes, that *laying down of life is quite literal*—Sgt. Ward and Deputy Fox did just that last week—but *there is another laying down of life* that is less tangible but also so important *right now*, and that’s the capacity to set aside the daily stuff of our lives—the schedules and responsibilities and eternal “to do” list—*so that we can be awake and attentive to the hearts of those around us; the capacity to lay these things down so that we can be present to the life of another, like friends so often do.*

Jesus continues, “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

And we might add, that *none of us choose the times in which we live and the events that shape our world or our community* that then ripple through our lives.

And in the midst of *all that is*, and *all that is to come*, Jesus tells his disciples and friends, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Jesus knows it’s about to get very real, and very hard, and his disciples, his friends, you and me, he has chosen *us* and appointed *us* to love, to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

So amidst all of this trauma, what does this look like in the flesh?

First, I don't think it is so much about getting the words right *as it is* about showing up and bearing witness. Sometimes, we don't engage because we just don't know what to say, but presence is *everything* when another is in pain.

Second, sometimes, people say, "*Don't give me more 'thoughts and prayers', those are meaningless when we need action!*" I get that sentiment, and yet, prayers *do* matter because the energy and power of love that we send forth with intentional prayer is potent. And in those situations where you can let that person *know* you are praying for them, that prayer is exponentially more potent. I want to share a card that I received yesterday from Church of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Euclid, OH. It simply said: WE SEND OUR DEEPEST CONDOLENCES AFTER THE RECENT TRAUMA IN YOUR COMMUNITY. WE PRAY FOR THE RECOVERY OF PEACE AND FOR GOD'S SPIRIT OF CONSOLATION AMONG YOU. WE PLEDGE, WITH GOD'S HELP, TO WORK TOWARD THE ELIMINATION OF GUN VIOLENCE AND ITS CAUSES. THE CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY, EUCLID, OHIO.

I don't know this church; I don't know the priest there, *and yet* they wrote *to us*, and I was reminded what it means to be joined together in the Body of Christ. *We hurt; they hurt. Our joy is their joy.* That's powerful.

Bearing fruit that will last might mean setting foot in unknown, maybe uncomfortable spaces with a willingness to engage in conversations as we *all* try to seek a way forward. I had a great example of that this week when I attended the Concert of Prayer at Alliance Bible Fellowship on Wednesday evening. I had never been to a Concert of Prayer; it's not my tradition; I wasn't sure what it was or how it would work, and *that* uneasy, not-knowing feeling almost keep me from going. I am also aware that being a woman who is ordained isn't always a welcome thing in traditions that don't ordain women. I had not been asked to speak, and that wasn't why I was going; I just thought it was important to show up in that space. I am ashamed to say, in my 17 years of living and serving in this community, I had never been inside that church. We prayed in small groups for the families, for law enforcement, and for the community; some pastors offered prayers; I was warmly welcomed by the Senior Pastor at Alliance; I met the pastor of the church at the end of our drive who has been here for three years; I met the new Director of Missions for the Three Forks Baptist Association, and I *sensed* that something shifted and softened in those I encountered just by my *willingness* to show up in that space.

We keep saying that we want to bridge the across to people who think really differently in our wider community, and *sometimes* that bridging starts *just* by showing up in different spaces. Broadening that out and thinking about your own lives, what unfamiliar and uncomfortable spaces might you be called to show up in, and what fruit might such encounters bear?

Bearing fruit that will last looks like continuing to work on root causes—trauma and mental illness being two revealed in this particular tragedy, and lest we slip into despair, we need to name out loud some amazing work being done quietly in our community. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), led locally by Mike Tanner and others across our

community who serve on that board, is doing such good work with families and individuals who live with mental illness. Mike and NAMI High Country have written a powerful letter to the editor that will go in the paper this coming week. NAMI's work *bears the kind of fruit that will last.*

Denise Presnell, a school social worker at Hardin Park, *has done, and continues to do, transformative work* through the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative. This work has brought together agencies, leaders, the educational community, law enforcement, the faith community, and a host of others to raise awareness about adverse childhood experiences and resiliency. *This bears the kind of fruit that will indeed last.*

Our law enforcement community is being trained in crisis intervention, and we have the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program (LEAD) in place locally. LEAD is “a trauma-informed, community oriented approach to policing that seeks 1) to reduce criminal behavior and 2) to improve public safety by connecting low level offenders with treatment, social services, and other community resources.” *This bears the kind of fruit that will last.*

At the more interpersonal level, *within the circles that we travel, bearing fruit that will last* means *slowing down* and *paying attention* to what people say and don't say. Sometimes, *another's pain* is spoken with a sigh, hinted at in an email or social media post or prayer request, sometimes it's spoken with a sadness in the eyes, an unspoken “why?”

So much of healing from trauma is allowing the space for the story to unfold, for the story to be told and moved *from the dark to the light*. So often, we bear things alone, but when the story is shared *and met with compassion*, it pulls us out of isolation and weaves us into the fabric of community and the weight of the trauma *becomes* just a little lighter, a little easier to carry.

Bearing witness involves a willingness to enter into another's feeling of powerlessness and simply sit there *with them*, and that is not an easy thing to do because who among us *likes* feeling powerless?

And yet, the Lord who “stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross,” he is our icon and companion for what this looks like. And when we step into that space with another, Jesus steps into that space *with both of us*. “A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...He has borne our infirmities,” Isaiah says. *Whatever suffering we hold, witness, hear, touch, Jesus holds it and loves to the end, not judging, not condemning, not retaliating, just pouring out compassion, forgiveness, love.* And yes, resurrection will come, but the marks of the nails, the wounds from the cross, they will remain.

That's real; that's honest. Resurrection life breathes *through* our wounds, *never* in spite of them.

And *maybe* that's why Jesus can dare to speak of joy *even* on the night before he is to die a traumatic death. Happiness is so dependent on how things are going in our lives, *but joy, joy goes deeper.* Joy dares to lay down one's life, descend to hell if need be, grab our hands and

lead us back into life. As Jesus reminds us, it's not just *our* joy, but it's *his* joy that lives in us. Jesus says all these things to us so that we *never* lose sight of the joy that can go *that* deep.

So, *even* amidst *all* the trauma that surrounds us, breathe deep of joy *wherever* you can. It's part of *bearing the fruit that will last*—without it, we'll sink into despair or burnout from exhaustion. Breathing deep of joy is a witness to resurrection that believes to the depth of our being that death is never the last word; *love is*. Trauma may run deep, but this love *runs deeper* still.

Jesus is *calling* us, *equipping* us for this work, *preparing* us for *what is* and *what is yet to come*, *loving* us every step of the way that we may *love one another* when the Good Fridays come. Abide in this love; let it take root deep within; lay down your life for one another; bear the fruit that will last. It's slow work, patient work, steadfast, often quiet work. And person by person, trauma by trauma, God will work through us *and* among us to bind up our wounds and make us whole that our joy may be complete. Amen.

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