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Text: John 20:19-31

### *Together and Different*

Although we are bombarded daily with advertisements, some commercials stick with us because they tug on our heartstrings. See if you can fill in the blank on this one, "Little pine: \$25; garden shovel: \$12; growing your own family tree: priceless. There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's...MasterCard." It was a powerful add campaign worked because it connected something as mundane as a credit card to our deep desire for building a legacy and a harmonious family life.

As I pondered this week's text from the Gospel of John, my mind leapt to another sentimental commercial from a few years back. Again, it takes ordinary things, this time cellphones, and connects them to something much larger. Here is a commercial for Android in 2014. Take a look... (See <https://youtu.be/AD-oCSol9QQ>)

It's a heartwarming commercial, isn't it? It taps into our desire for inclusiveness. The series of "And moments" highlight the power of different people coming together. It mixes a variety of personal experiences with defining social moments. It takes us from the school lunchroom to a civil rights march and gay wedding before ending with one young woman gazing off hopefully down a dusty road. The commercial leverages these powerful symbols of unity and diversity, encouraging us, "Be together. Not the same."

Part of the reason this commercial resonates so deeply is that these values are core to our faith tradition, as well. Today's story is a prime example. One of the disciples, Thomas, misses the risen Jesus' visit to the others and cannot believe their good news. Thomas envies their experience so much that it keeps him from embracing the Easter reality of resurrection life. A week later, Jesus visits the disciples all together, gives Thomas the common experience he so desperately craved, and then declares, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus embodies the values of inclusion here, reminding the disciples that others will come to believe differently and that is a blessed thing. Jesus' Spirit inspires togetherness and difference.

Contrary to the Spirit of Jesus, a lack of respect for different faith traditions flared up in a vile way this week. A flyer for "Punish a Muslim Day" on April 3<sup>rd</sup> originated in England and made the rounds on social media here in the United States. It crudely offered a point system for persecuting Muslim people. While the flyer is easy to mock for its ignorance, it added real fear to the lives of British and American Muslims who face discrimination every day. This is on top of what the Council for American-Islamic Relations describes as an "unprecedented spike" in bigotry against American Muslims and other minorities writ large over the last year and a half.

Although the Gospel of John at times hardly reads as tract for interfaith unity, this is because it reflects a burgeoning Christian community that also feared persecution. Ironically, Jesus confronts the author's own fears and prejudices within the text. Jesus tells the disciples three times, "Peace be with you." Christ's peace here is more than the absence of violence—it calls them out from behind locked doors to share his peace with the world. Such peace is the presence of justice and love that casts out fear and bigotry. God's Holy Spirit is alive and active whenever people, no matter how different, come together for peace.

This week also marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another sad event in our nation's history, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The clip of King in the commercial we watched was from his soaring, "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963. By 1968, the burden of keeping the struggle for justice alive had taken its toll on King. His continued push for justice and opposition to the Vietnam War had alienated many whites, and many blacks were growing impatient with the slow pace of his non-violent resistance. When he arrived in Memphis to stand in solidarity with striking sanitation workers, the scope of his work had broadened to bring together people of different races to confront poverty. In the face of intense criticism, he strived to grow the base of the movement to save the soul of America.

In his final speech on the night before he died, King said:

"The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period...in a way that [people], in some strange way, are responding."

Indeed, many of the challenges King faced in Memphis remain. It feels like a dark time, and yet God's work through people shine like stars in the night sky. You don't have to look far to see the light. This past Wednesday, the bells in our steeple rang 39 times for each of King's living years. Our bells joined the bells of steeples all across the country. The ringing bells were a beautiful symbol of our unity in the commitment to justice and the value of our individual voices ringing for all to hear.

This being together and different is at the heart of the Christian faith and the sacrament we are about to partake. Just as a single loaf requires many different grains of wheat, we are both one and unique in Christ. It is not about sentimentality for the sake of selling you anything. Christ's table is a heavenly promise of a present and future of connection, both with God and one another. Together and different, we share a common table, so that our individual efforts will build up Christ's vision of peace. Amen.

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