

It's almost exactly four years since I moved into my townhouse; but I confess it's only been about four weeks since I started really working on the landscaping. I have perennials or whatever you call the kind that come back every year without you doing anything, so I've just been letting nature take its course. But this year, with a little help from the neighbor and his power tools, I got rid of some of what was overgrown and, having not a blank slate but at least a reasonable starting place, I've been weeding, mulching, planting, watering, and reclaiming borders. I was surprised when, I noticed for the first time that the perfectly rounded, symmetrical shrubs with evenly-disbursed white blooms along my neighbor's walk are just a different shape and color, but still the same plant as the unruly, hot pink azaleas along my walk. I didn't even know that you could shape an azalea into an intentional shape, let alone how you would go about doing that. Their row of very precise white blossoms are lovely, but my wild, flaming fuchsia blooms are beautiful, too; even if I could constrain them, I don't think I'd want to. That is as good a metaphor as any for the love of God and the hope of God's church.

Our readings today situate us in two entirely different eras of salvation history, neither of which are where we are on the liturgical calendar. This sixth Sunday of Easter puts us between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. However, today's reading from John's gospel takes us back to the night Jesus was arrested, and the reading from Acts takes us forward, beyond the resurrection, ascension, and even Pentecost, to when the church started growing beyond its Jewish roots to include gentiles. If the gospel sounds familiar, it's probably because Maundy Thursday's gospel is a similar snippet of the same passage: Jesus' lengthy farewell discourse where he repeatedly commands the disciples to love one another. As his last instruction, Jesus doesn't command them to arm themselves against the soldiers who will come to arrest him, or to whip up support among the crowds so they'll demand his release instead of Barabbas. Jesus doesn't command them to seek revenge against Judas for his betrayal or against the religious leaders for their conspiracy, or against the Roman Empire for unjustly executing him. He doesn't command them to take over the government in his name or even to start a new religion. He commands them to love one another.

This commandment is necessary because Jesus has observed these men living and working together for three years. They have argued amongst themselves about who is the greatest. They've asked if they can call down fire and brimstone on their enemies. Two of them sent their mommy to petition him for higher status positions. And Jesus knows that Judas is about to betray him, Peter is about to deny him, and none of them will trust each other when he begins re-appearing after the resurrection. So it's no small step for Jesus to convince them to serve one another in lovingkindness. But that's just the first step. As difficult as it may have been for Jesus' 12 closest disciples to love one another, or for the broader group of Jesus' followers—Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Cleopas, and the other unnamed disciples—to love one another, that task is about

to get much bigger, because the church is about to get much bigger. The book of Acts is all about the church growing beyond that cozy group of disciples. We call it the Acts of the Apostles, but it might be more accurate to call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit that Blew the Sandals off the Apostles, because God keeps surprising them by who is included in the church.

Last week we read about the Spirit sending Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem. The official asks, “Here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?” and Philip’s response, which is simply to baptize him, demonstrates that not race nor nationality nor non-binary gender is a reason to exclude anyone from the community of faith. Meanwhile, Peter dreams about the Lord telling him to eat forbidden meat; insulted at the suggestion he would violate Jewish dietary laws, Peter refuses, until the Lord says, “What I have made clean, you shall not call profane.” Christians love that passage when we’re ordering a shrimp cocktail or grilling cheeseburgers, but kosher food isn’t the point. Peter sees this vision of inclusivity just before he is summoned to the centurion Cornelius’ gentile household. While he is there, the Holy Spirit interrupts his sermon to inspire the assembled gentiles. Peter asks a similar question to the Ethiopian official’s: *Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?* Not only are they baptized, Peter stays with them, accepting their hospitality just as he would from a Jewish family.

As clearly as Acts demonstrates that these questions are rhetorical, the church has often come up with (wrong) answers to them. *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* And the church over time has answered: *your age, your dogma, your past, your incomplete, incorrect, or incompatible understanding of our brand of theology...Or Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?* and we put a hand up...as if we were commanded to guard the gate to the family of God, when what we were commanded to do was? Love one another.

It is hard to live in the chaos of this world and not yearn for order, predictability, and quite frankly, control. So as the church, we can be tempted to circle the wagons and content ourselves with loving each other as an entrenched, likeminded community. But Acts reminds us that even from the earliest days of the church, God’s love could not be contained; the Spirit was always one step ahead, inspiring people who taught the disciples as much about God’s abundant love as the disciples taught them. As we sing the rest of our way through today’s liturgy, honoring the cycle of planting and tending, harvest and rest, may we remember that we are called to nourish—never stifle—the growth of God’s loving community. A garden can be absolutely stunning when it’s meticulous and uniform and growing according to plan. But my own amateur landscaping skills aside, God’s garden grows wild.