

April 24, 2016 The Rev'd Dr. Robert W. Seney

- [Acts 11:1-18](#)
- [Psalm 148](#)
- [Revelation 21:1-6](#)
- [John 13:31-35](#)

The Fifth Sunday of Easter [C] April 24, 2016: St. Andrew's, Denver [First Sermon]

In the Name of Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen

Before I begin, let me say that I am both awed and humbled to be standing here in this pulpit before you. Since our move up from Durango to Denver, you have seen us worshipping with you in the pews. [at the 11:00 service] Today begins a new chapter in our relationship. In the time that we have been here, I can honestly say that I have heard some of the best preaching that I have ever heard in the Episcopal Church. The wisdom, the insight, the messages of love and service that Elizabeth, George, and Melisa have brought to us are truly wonderful and of unique quality. Even with my background as a professor, I can find little fault. I am truly awed and honored to be standing here-- where they have stood and to share what I hope and pray is God's word with you.

Perhaps, right off the bat, I should throw in a caveat here in terms of my preaching style. Caveat – I guess that gives me away as a professor. I have spent most of my 50 years as a priest in our Episcopal Schools and the educational world, in the business we are called “schoolies.” I ended my active academic career as a Professor of Education at Mississippi University for Women, in Columbus, Mississippi. As a result, I often cross that subtle line between preaching and teaching. “You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher.” But I assure you, there will **NOT** be a quiz afterward.

Perhaps you have noticed something different about our lessons during *Easter tide*. All of our **First Lessons**, normally from the *Old Testament*, have been from the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles* and basically they have been stories of the actions of the Apostles and disciples after their experience of the *Resurrection of Our Lord*. They were changed people; they no longer hid out; but in fact were openly proclaiming the Risen Lord even in the face of the threats from the Jewish Leaders. These lessons retell the amazing exploits of the Apostles after the *Resurrection of Jesus*. Just a couple of Sundays ago, we remembered how the Apostles ran like scared rabbits! They scattered. One of them, Peter, one of the closest of His followers, even denied that he knew Jesus at all! Then suddenly in just a matter of a few days or weeks, these same men were standing in the Temple and teaching *the condemnation of the Jewish leaders and the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and proclaiming Him as the Messiah – the Christ!*

In today's lesson, we have the story of St. Peter's vision and experience which caused him to realize that the *Good News of Jesus Christ* was not just for the Jewish people but for all people.

Our Second Lessons, normally from one of the Epistles, have been readings from the *Revelation of St. John*, that strange book which recounts St. John's visions and is written in code – a code that only *the early Church would fully understand*. Today, we have that most important of lessons: *See, I am making all things new*.

And the third thing about our lessons is that all of our Gospel Lessons have been from the *Gospel of St. John* – the so called *Gospel of Love* and which is often considered to be more “theological” than the Three Synoptic Gospels.

Not only have these Gospel lessons been from *St. John*, they all come from the same section of *John* that scholars call the *Discourse in the Upper Room*. These are teachings of Jesus that St. John has recorded in five rather long chapters. [John 13-17] They are set up as last instructions or teachings to the Apostles by Jesus after they had completed the *Passover Meal* to which Our Lord had given a new meaning by establishing a **new** practice which we call the *Holy Eucharist*.

Scholars are fairly certain that these teachings were **not** given in this form as one final “sermon” but rather this is St. John’s literary and perhaps theological way to preserve many of the sayings of Jesus and to give them a particular focus. Whatever the cause or reason, we have a rich catalogue of many of the teachings and sayings of Jesus in just this one section and this in itself makes these chapters important.

In today’s Gospel, which is **also** the last part of the Gospel for *Maundy Thursday*, Jesus tells his followers: *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*. And thus we have one of the simple and major lessons of the Christian life: *Keeping the commandments of Jesus is the evidence that we truly love Him*. Simple enough, but oh the implications!

As you can see we have plenty of fodder here for a multitude of sermons. My task was to select one. I have chosen first to go to the *Acts of the Apostles*. While my inclination is to head off on a lecture about not only the importance of this *New Testament* book, but its background as well, I will hold myself in check and mention **only** my own fascination, on which I have done a bit of research, on just who is this **Theophilus**? I must confess that here—perhaps, I have removed my biretta and put on my mortar board.

The Acts of the Apostles begins with the words: *To Theophilus: The first book I wrote was about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven*. We think that this first book is the *Gospel of St. Luke* and there is much agreement that *Acts* was written by the same author of the *Gospel According to St. Luke* and it is intended to be a continuation of that Gospel.

I personally find all the little mysteries of identity in the Scriptures to be most interesting and very intriguing. For example, I have a great fascination with Onisimus, the run-away slave from St. Paul’s *Letter to Philemon* and **here** we have another one of these little mysteries -- just who is this Theophilus?

What we find is that there is little or no information on just who this person was. You would think that there would be many resources documenting a name listed so prominently in this, one of the most important books of the whole *New Testament*. But this is just not so, and basically we don’t know who he was!

However, the theories are really interesting. First, because of the name itself, Theophilus, which in the Greek means “Lover of God,” it is suggested that this simply means “Christian Reader”! So in this tradition, you and I are Theophilus.

Another theory points out that the use of the title “most excellent” really does point to a real person. In fact, this title, “Most Excellent” is used three times in the *Book of Acts* in reference to persons of high rank. So some scholars believe that Theophilus is a code or secret Christian name of Flavianus Clemens, cousin and heir of the Emperor Domitian, who conducted the first major persecution against the early Christians. And according to tradition, it was during

the reign of Domitian and his persecutions that St. John, in exile on the Isle of Patmos, wrote the *Book of Revelation* as a comfort to those who were persecuted. At any rate, Falavius Clemens was put to death in 96 AD and his wife, Domitilla was banished and it is documented that she was a Christian. In this tradition, then, this letter, *The Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, was one of the first explanations of Christianity to the Royal House of Rome.

Another tradition is it that Theophilus was a wealthy resident of Antioch, where it is thought that St. Luke was born. My resources pointed out that the identity of Theophilus is even more confused by **incorrectly** identifying him as Bishop Theophilus of Antioch, who lived later – at the end of the Second Century. So we just aren't sure who Theophilus is, but I rather like the idea based upon the Greek translation of his name: Lover of God, Christian Reader. You and me.

One important idea that comes from *Acts* is that it is here that we learn the followers of Christ are called “People of the Way.” The early Christian movement came to be known as “the Way.” And so, Jesus’ followers were “People of the Way.” ‘They were not so much members of an institution or adherents to a particular set of developed doctrines, but rather they were disciples – and the true meaning of the term, disciples, is that they are learners—students.

And now turning to our Gospel Lesson for today, we find the new Commandment which Our Lord gave us: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* [John 13:34]

In this commandment, Jesus has declared that our mark of love for **Him** will be – *how we love each other!* It is by our mutual love that we are known and marked as Christians. We’re all familiar with the old hymn: *They will know that we are Christians by our love.* What we learn from this lesson today is that this is not just a nice phrase put to music – but rather it proclaims one of the basic tenants of the Christian faith and life.

The existence of such love is the distinguishing mark of the Christian family. This commandment is described as “new” not because nothing like it has ever been uttered before, but because it reflects the new relationships within the Godhead, and still more, because it belongs to the new age which the work and life of Jesus introduced.

This is what marked the *People of the Way* and this is what marks us a well.

Three years ago, Bishop Rob invited The Rev'd Dr. Dwight Zscheile (shay-le) ---- to be the leader of our clergy retreat. Father Zscheilie is the author of the book, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identify*, which was the focus of that particular retreat and later that same year of our Diocesan Council. The thoughts of that retreat and my re-reading of the book continue to stick with me.

The basic thrust or theme of the book is found in the question: *What might it mean for the Episcopal Church to live into a renewed identity as People of the Way of Jesus **in our time and place?*** [Page 5]

Dwight writes specifically that his book is about “renewing Episcopal identify for twenty-first century America.” He notes that in the past couple of decades as with other main line denominations that there has been a dramatic decline in membership in the Episcopal Church. At the same time, there is a growing and diverse population in the United States. Many congregations have studied and attempted to respond to this situation – some with success and some not so much. This is, in fact, a focus of our own life here at St. Andrew’s. Dwight points

out that most of ‘the conversations have been largely focused inward, upon the church and that we have tried many strategies and techniques to be more effective at what we’ve always done: to grow; to be more welcoming; or to be healthier.’ [Page 3] But we must honestly acknowledge that these approaches have not substantially changed the picture and the Episcopal Church continues to shrink in significance.

Dwight offers this observation: *...that renewing Episcopal identity will not come through one more conversation about the church and how to organize it better. Instead the future of the Episcopal Church in the US depends upon attending first and foremost to God’s life and movement and discovering how Episcopalians are particularly gifted and called to join up with that movement. It is time to have a different kind of conversation.* [Pages 3-4]

There is no doubt in Dwight’s mind, and in many of ours’, that the Episcopal Church has a unique and important contribution, message, and witness to the world. It is all a matter of how we act out and share these contributions and messages and **how** we witness. This is what we must re-discover in a deeply secular society. It is a matter of re-discovering how we become “People of the Way” in **our** time and place.

I think there are some non-negotiables and Dwight readily agrees. As we seek to become People of the Way, these non-negotiables identify us as Episcopalians. First written in 1886 and then re-confirmed by the 1920 Lambeth Conference, the document is commonly known as the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral*. It was first delineated to lead the church in ecumenical discussions, especially those with the Roman Catholic Church. We noted that there are four non-negotiables: Scripture and Tradition; the Sacraments; the Creeds; and the Apostolic ministry. We hold these four things as being essential to our understanding of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. They are the core values of our discipline and define our Episcopal identity.

In his book, Dwight acknowledges that these are the values, the identity that brought him to the Episcopal Church. As indeed, this is what brought **me** to the Episcopal Church as well. The question now is: How do we witness – share – these core values to a secular world? How do we go about *renewing our Episcopal identity for twenty-first-century America?* (Page 3)

In an ever increasing secular society, how do we proclaim and live the *Good News of Jesus Christ*; share the Episcopal core values and identity; as we seek to become **People of the Way?**

There is no doubt in Dwight’s mind and mine that the Episcopal Church has a unique and important contribution, message, and witness to the world. It is a matter of how we act out and share these contributions and messages and **how** we witness - that we must re-discover in a deeply secular society. It is a matter of re-discovering how we become “People of the Way” in our time and place.

To bring this to a close: I offer here four thoughts or lessons that I think we must learn:

- **The first lesson** is *...that we cannot truly be disciples of Jesus Christ and remain comfortable with the way the world is.* [Mead, pp 7-8] If our faith is to grow into something meaningful, and not just a pious hobby, we will have to endure some discomfort. We don’t need to beat ourselves up, *but the injustices of the world should grind and bruise us enough that we are willing to do something to change it.* [Mead, p 8]
- **Next:** As People of the way... we [must] *intentionally invite the presence of God into our lives. Once we make that honest invitation, we [then] relinquish control over the times and ways God will speak to us.* [Page 37]

- **Third:** The organizing principle – the unifying framework of our lives is that we see **love** as the bottom line. We must accept the knowledge that God is love and this unifies the pursuit of all truth about God.
- **And finally:** When we choose to be disciples of Christ, People of the Way, we are keenly aware of our own imperfections. We acknowledge that *We are called to imitate Christ in loving God and others*, but we also acknowledge that because of...*human fear, selfishness, and doubt, we simply cannot love as perfectly as Jesus did. **Still, we choose to try**, because we know that the Holy Spirit, God's "own first gift to those who believe," empowers us to help bring about the kingdom of God.* [Mead pp.55-56]

Again, // our first task as we seek to become *People of the Way*; as we seek to find and renew the identity of the Episcopal witness is first and foremost to attend, to listen and to see God's life and movement in our lives and in our world. And that is directed by what we heard from our Gospel lesson for today: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

May God help us and guide us as in our task. Let us pray:

Oh God, Ruler of all Things, we ask your guidance as we seek to become People of the Way; as we seek to renew our identity in You; and as we seek to know and experience your Love and Presence. We pray that You will be made known to us today in the hearing of the word; in our prayers for each other; and in the Breaking of Bread. For we pray this in the name of Our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

Maundy Thursday Gospel **John 13:1-17, 31b-35**
 Today's John 13:31-35

John 13:31-35

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."