

**“Those who love me will keep my word.”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C. May 13, 2007. (Text: John 14:23-29)*

Before I say anything else, I want to wish a happy Mothers’ Day to all of you, and especially to the mothers who are able to have their children with them here in church. My mother was a woman who treasured the Word of God. She read the Bible every day, and she didn’t just read it out of duty, like brushing her teeth, an exercise that had to be performed because it was “necessary.” She thought about what she read, took it to heart, and did her best to apply it to her life.

When Mom died ten years ago, I had to go through her things and decide what to do with them. She’d been sick and living first in a retirement home, then in a nursing home for several years. So she didn’t have many possessions left for me to deal with when she died. But what she *did* have, what she’d held on to through all the ups and downs of her last years, was a big cardboard box of letters. She had all the letters that I – her only child – had ever written to her, from the time I went away to college right up to the very end. And she had all the letters her mother had written to her. I don’t know how often she pulled letters out and re-read them, but I’m sure she did.

When I turned 50, we were living in Thailand, and Joan gave me a beautiful, handmade, polished teakwood box for my birthday. Into that box, over the past twelve years, I’ve put the special cards and letters that have come to me (mostly from Joan, but some from my children and close friends), messages of love, tenderness, encouragement, and promise. I take them out and read through them from time to time, and what I read helps me. It makes me feel good. It makes me feel loved. —I imagine many of you have a box, or a drawer, or a shelf where you keep cards and letters like that, and that you do just the same as I do. When we love, we store up the words of our beloved. We keep them. We turn the words over in our minds. We believe the promises. And we do what our beloved ones ask of us.

*Jesus said, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”* For us to love Jesus and treasure his word is to open our hearts and make a home for him there – a dwelling place for God with us. And that means heaven itself, drawn down into the center of our merely human life.

In St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, there hangs a famous picture by the Victorian artist Holman Hunt. Many of you have seen copies of it, I know. The painting shows Jesus holding a lantern and knocking at a heavy old door, set into a wall. Vines have grown over part of the door, and it’s obvious that it has not been opened in very long time. The door has massive hinges, but there is no door-handle and no keyhole. The door can’t be opened except from the inside. —The title of the picture is “Christ at the Heart’s Door.” It’s a portrayal of the Bible verse where the Lord says, *“I stand and the door and knock.”*

Twenty-five or more years ago, I was sitting in my study reading Morning Prayer. The New Testament lesson was almost the same as the gospel for this morning. It was a sunny, warm Florida morning and somehow I dozed off as I was praying and had a dream. In the dream, I was living alone in a tiny, run-down little frame house in a seedy neighborhood. The paint was peeling. The house was a mess in every way, inside and out. I had stacked dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the counters. The furniture was dusty, old and ripped, the wallpaper was faded and torn, and the only light came from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. In the dream, it was nearly dark when there was a knock at the door of my ugly little house. I opened the door a crack and looked out. There stood Jesus.

Through the little opening in the door I said, “Oh, no! Lord, you can’t come in! My house is a mess. I’m so embarrassed. Please go see somebody else and come to me again later after I’ve had a chance to get ready for you.”

But the Lord answered, “Please let me come in! I don’t care what your house looks like. In fact, I’ll help you clean up. I’ll work alongside you ‘til everything that needs to be done *is* done. And then, when we’re

finished with the work, *I will fix supper for you, and then we'll sit at your table and eat together.*" In the dream, I did what he asked. I opened the door. —And then I woke up.

Jesus comes to us *before* we love him. He comes to us first, in our need, disorder, confusion, and sin. He knocks at the door of our heart, the door of our life, and our first response is, "I'm not ready for you. Go away!" But if we invite Jesus into our house, messy as it might be, into the deep places of our heart, he comes in with tenderness and power—not to judge or scold or point out our failures, but to transform everything that we're willing to let him touch. He can do wonders in the human soul, but only if we'll open the door, only if we'll let him in, only if we'll cooperate.

I wonder how we'd react if Jesus had arrived at the door of our church this morning as the service was just getting under way, and politely asked the usher to go up and tell the Rector that he had arrived and would like to come in. —I imagine the usher would be pretty nervous. In fact, we'd all be nervous. And what on earth would I *say* to him, under the circumstances?

I might say something like, "Lord, we're truly honored that you've come to our church. But, you know, this is the *off*-season. We don't get many visitors in the *off*-season. And lots of our members are away in May, too, so there aren't very many people in church. (There were lots of people here on Easter, though. Honest!) We don't have anything special planned for this Sunday, either. Andrew called seven soloists and couldn't find a single one who could come and sing. We'd like to do something to honor you – really! – so it would work out a lot better for us and certainly be much nicer for you if you just came back later and gave us some time to get ready. If you did that, then I could have a fine sermon prepared. Andrew would probably be able to recruit an entire choir for the occasion, and most of our members would be in church to meet you. — Why, if you gave us a month we could probably even get the Bishop up here. I know he'd like to meet you too!"

What do you think? This is crazy of course, but what do you think Jesus would be hoping to find in Christ Episcopal Church of Aspen, Colorado, if he dropped in unexpectedly for a visit one off-season Sunday morning? Packed pews? Mega-church music, with a pop band and a singing group where each performer holds a microphone? A big name, famous preacher? Gourmet fare at coffee hour? (Well, o.k., we *always* have gourmet goodies, right?) —I don't think so. Jesus wouldn't be looking for any of those things. He'd be looking for the only thing that really matters: evidence that we had heard his word and wanted to keep it.

I don't say he'd be looking for evidence that we've been perfectly obedient to his word. Because we haven't been. We're *imperfect* people. Our spiritual houses are *not* always beautifully clean and tidy. In fact, sometimes they're a mess. But if we've heard and valued what Christ has taught, then we're going to want him in our lives. And we're going to be willing to work on obeying his words as well. Obeying the Lord is evidence that we take him seriously.

*Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. [And] The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."*

The truth is that the Holy Spirit *has* come to us, and the Voice of the Spirit is speaking right now to remind us of the truth we've heard from Jesus, to remind us of the love that has accepted us in our ugliness and sin, the love that gave itself to make us beautiful and new. He's speaking right now. Can you hear him? He's reminding us of the tender words that can make all the difference to people hungry for peace, hungry to know God —people conscious of the hollowness there is in our souls until we open our heart's door and welcome the One who stands outside and knocks.

Pray with me: Come, Lord, come in and be our constant Guest! Come, Lord, come in and live with us forever and ever! Come, Lord, come in and make our house your home! Amen.