

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter: John 17:6-19

The Rev. Brooks Cato

What a trip! It's only been one Sunday since I saw y'all last, but it feels like a whole month! I met up with Becca and her family down in Florida and got into all sorts of stuff. Do you ever have one of those days where you do so many different things that, when you lie down for bed and reflect, you can't really believe that all happened in one day? That whole vacation was like that. For starters, I can't remember the last time I saw all those people. Or saw that many people, for that matter. It's a weird thing traveling from here to a place where the majority of people just pretend Corona doesn't exist. But also, it's a weird thing making the shift from a pandemic-defined world to a world with vaccines. We could hug Becca's mom after a terrible year, thanks be to God and some incredibly talented scientists! Becca's sister has joined the circus, and her sparkly outfits now include sparkly masks to keep the wonder alive and herself safe. It's a weird world. But yeah, I got to see family I haven't seen in years, watch my nieces and nephew grow six feet in a week, and catch up on everyone else's travels (or lack thereof). I went deep sea fishing and reeled in critters I'd never heard of before. I learned how to spin fire from my sister-in-law's circus neighbor. And Becca and I bought an old truck to get us back home. All in all, it was a great trip and good for my soul.

But wouldn't you know it, the night before we left, news broke that there was this pesky little gas shortage springing up. We went out and filled up the gas-guzzler we'd just bought, and Becca got a pair of spare gas cans to buy us a few more miles if things got hairy on the road. By the time she left the station, cars lined up a block away just to get in. We limped into Chattanooga and stayed the night with Fr. Steve, who just happened to be in town on his own vacation. No gas problems then, and we slept soundly only to wake up to a weird piece of news: all of Chattanooga was out of gas. All of it. We checked in with a friend in Knoxville on the route that would take us to 81 and eventually here. The first text said no problems there, and our friend thought we were either joking or being way too cautious about the pipeline. Within a few hours, though, she realized the truth, and the pumps in Knoxville ran dry, too. What luck, right? To start a roadtrip in the middle of a global pandemic and a massive gas pipeline failure? Yeesh. Anyway, we rerouted through Kentucky and Ohio (did y'all know Ohio has hills? I did not know this.) and we made decent time the rest of the way home, no gas shortage problems at all. Thank. God.

But here's the thing. I've been kinda obsessing over this gas shortage thing, as you might imagine, or at least I was when we were on the road. I rolled my eyes when the hackers responsible for it said they didn't mean to cause any inconvenience. It kinda felt like a bunch of kids that just got caught. The ball got rolling and once it was out of their control they realized just how much of a mess they'd created. I mean, sure, maybe they didn't mean to cause that much trouble, but, and this is a wild thought here, maybe they shouldn't have tried to cause any trouble? But that's not actually what bugs me here. Hackers gonna hack. Like it or not, we kind of expect it. What I don't expect, or what I haven't expected before and am more likely to expect going forward, is how people react to this sort of thing. As it turns out, the pipeline hack shouldn't have been such a big deal. There was enough gas to go around, even with the disruption. At least there *was* enough until people started hearing about the disruption and freaked out and before you knew it, folks were lining up at gas stations, topping off tanks, filling

up dozens of gas cans, pouring gasoline into rubbermaid containers and, believe it or not, plastic shopping bags.

Now I should acknowledge real quick that we topped off our tank and did get two five-gallon cans for the road. We might've been part of the problem. Were we prudent to do so? Probably. Were we part of the problem? Also probably. You see, the issue wasn't that there was a gas shortage. The issue was that people thought there was a gas shortage, and they reacted, and that caused a gas shortage. It's toilet paper all over again. And I'll admit to stocking up on a few extra rolls of that last year, too. There wasn't really a shortage on paper goods until people freaked out about there being a shortage on paper goods, and then there actually was a shortage on paper goods! Gasoline and toilet paper. We live in strange times. Now, I don't mean to call names or call any of you out (or myself, for that matter). The appearance of shortages led to actual shortages, and suddenly there was no toilet paper and whole cities ran out of gas for real.

The other day, I heard someone compare the weirdness of our world now to a pizza party. They said it's like there's plenty of pizza for everyone, so you go through the line and grab a slice, knowing there's enough for you to get a second slice later. But there's also folks going through the line that see all those other people lined up and grab three slices on their first pass to make sure they get their own. With enough folks like that going through the line, not only will there not be enough for you to get your second slice later, but the pizza's likely to run out before the folks in the back of the line even get their first slice! You see, there are some folks in the world that move with an eye towards how their own actions affect others, and there are some that move through the world intent on making sure they get their own. Maybe that's with no thought given to others or maybe they've justified some reason why their own needs are more important than everyone else's. Or maybe I'm just grumpy about all these pizza stealers because I just did 1300 miles worth of gas station hopping, but I think this is a growing problem in our world. There've always been people looking out for Number 1, sure, but it seems things are amplified these days. Maybe it's the pandemic? Maybe it's the weird ways media and social media make us interact? Maybe it's some part of being human in community? But I'll tell you this. Whatever the reason, it ain't Christian. (I can say "ain't" right now 'cause I just got my South tank refilled.)

You know, while we were on our drive, we had a running joke. I'd see something funny and ask Becca, "Hey, you know how I know we're in the South?" And she'd look up and see a billboard for fried catfish barbecue or a gun show and gardening event or a three-story cross made out of aluminum siding. There were also a ton of Christian billboards, though these didn't peter out as we crossed the Mason-Dixon. There were basically two kinds: the kinds that wanted you to love God and the kinds that wanted you to be afraid. Afraid that there isn't enough of God's love to go around. Afraid that if you don't find God, you'll be as damned as Judas. Afraid that if you die right now, all the days on the other side of the grave will be filled with pain and regret. Trained to be afraid with hope resting in the hands of an angry God. And sure, that's one way to do it. Seems to work for a lot of folks, but it's not what we're about. If we're about any kind of billboards, we're about that love kind. Love God. Love your neighbor. There's plenty of love to go around. It doesn't run out. There's no shortage of God's love, and there's no shortage of human love, either. But if we let the ways of the world win, it's easy to think that love can run out. And what then? What happens when there's a run on love? Why have concern for your

neighbor if love is a limited commodity? Why love yourself if there's only enough to share with God?

Y'all. It's a dangerous road when you think love can run out. So don't let it. Start your days with the love of God. Name it. We do that in this service of Morning Prayer, and you can do it even when we're not praying together here. Name that love of God at the beginning of your day, and move in the world with that love shared. Jesus prays that love for us in the Garden, even says we aren't of this world as he prays. That doesn't mean we don't care for this world, it means we don't let the ways of this world defeat us, defeat our hope, defeat our love.

Even with all that roadtripping and the weirdness of not knowing if a gas station would have bags over the pumps when we pulled over, even with all the weirdness of people being afraid as a group, everywhere we stopped along the way, we saw something different. We saw individuals being loving and friendly and caring. We saw a car pulled over trying to give a stalled car a jump. We laughed with cashiers and bemoaned the awful disappointment that is gas station coffee first thing in the morning. We felt the relief of the kind honesty of a mechanic, the providence of a friend with a spare bedroom on short notice, the support of family checking in from afar. We even felt this weird rise in our hearts when we saw the first I(Heart)NY sign on the highway. Home has shifted for us, thanks to that unlimited love in our world. Love wins. Always. Even when the world looks like it has over the last year and a half. Even when people freak out and fear has its day, even when exasperation deflates, love wins. Always. God's love wins.