

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C, John 13:31-35
May 21, 2019
The Rev. Devon Anderson

McDougall-Hunt, a small neighborhood of single-family homes on the East Side of Detroit, once represented the best America had to offer working people. In the years leading up to and directly following WWII, it became a predominantly black neighborhood of mostly automobile and manufacturing workers, many of them employed at the nearby Packard automotive plant, which was once among the largest luxury-car manufacturers in the world. Today, the neighborhood, full of vacant lots and crumbling houses, looks like a sentence that has been sloppily erased. If you didn't live in McDougall-Hunt, there wouldn't be much reason to be there – if not for a four-block-long street called Heidelberg.

*At first glance, Heidelberg appears much like the streets that surround it, pockmarked and mostly empty, but it transforms about halfway down its length, becoming what looks from a distance like a junkyard but on closer inspection is a bizarre open-air museum that occupies two whole blocks. One vacant lot has sculptures strewn about like children's toys on the lawn of a happy home. Nearby sits an old car, painted pink, the grass from what used to be someone's yard growing around and through it; attached to a tree hangs a piece of wood painted like a clock...sidewalks and the street are painted with fading, multicolored polka dots, leading the eye to another lot across the way, with more clocks attached to trees and near the back, the wooden frame of a house that has been built out into a makeshift chapel, affixed with a pink cross and covered in street signs, vinyl records, and a placard that announces: **I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.***

The open-air museum is known as the “Heidelberg Project,” and it has become, over the years, one of the most visited sites in Detroit, attracting 200,000 visitors annually. The artist is Tyree Guyton. Even as Detroit emptied out over the decades, Guyton stayed put, returning to the street of his childhood with a compulsory repetition. “It’s a special street,” he says. “It’s a special place that I can’t leave. I can hear it talking to me.” Guyton was unwilling to watch the neighborhood he loved so much crumble into nothing. As more and more families left, he took what remained, the odd leftovers, the detritus of neglect, and reconfigured all of it into his sculptures and paintings and installations, holding up a kind of cracked mirror to the street and everything that has been lost there. Taken as a whole, the project is a reverse memento mori – an assertion of life, a work that announces: *I’m still here*. It’s art that offers clarity amidst chaos, a proclamation of continued life and renewal amidst the ashes, symbols of strength and hope and determination injected into desperate times.

Guyton’s story could be biblical. His life’s work proclaims what each of our scriptural stories offer us this morning – clarity in confusion, a vision forward in desperate times. Our first reading from Acts, for

example, is a story so important to the early church that it is told in chapter 10 and then retold in chapter 11 as Peter testifies in Jerusalem before a feisty group of critics. Christianity is not even yet a word much less a thing, as the disciples fan out across the continent to tell the story of Jesus and build communities of faith interested in patterning their lives from Jesus' example. At issue: who is in and who is out, defining the boundary between followers of Jesus and everyone else. How could they define who they were, if they don't first define who they were not? No issue was more debated by the earliest Christian communities or more important to them than whether their newfound faith was intended only for Jews or whether it was to include Gentiles while allowing them to remain Gentiles. And this well-worn, circular, never-ending question is what is posed, again, to Peter in the temple. And into their uncertainty, their anxiety, their confusion Peter responds with a story – because he was taught by Jesus - - who knew more than anyone, that stories, not arguments, change lives. The only way out – the only way forward – is through a story.

“I saw a vision,” begins Peter, who describes to the assembled crowd his dream, piece by piece, detail by detail, all the way through to its concluding insight: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” It's that simple. Into the endless cycle of fruitless debate and anxious hand-wringing Peter shares his moment of clarity – in Christ there is no east or west, no Jew nor Greek, no male or female. In Christ there is no division. All are welcome to participate, to belong, to follow, to deepen, to love. That's the mission of the early church, he tells them. Not agonizing over who's in and who's out – but, simply, inclusion, and the spreading of the story of Jesus - about how he came to restore us to God, renew our capacity to minister and love, enlarge our compassion for other people both within the fold and without. Your business, Peter tells the people in Jerusalem, is to, simply, share the story far and wide, with whoever, whenever. All are worthy enough, clean enough, deserving enough. Clarity graciously offered into the swirl of confusion.

Again, we see this theme in our reading from Revelation. In it, the Christian prophet John of Patmos relays his visions to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. Though the emperor Nero, who has persecuted and tortured the fragile, fledgling church, has been replaced by the less-cruel successor, Domitian, still the early churches are struggling – again like Peter's Jerusalem before it – mostly amongst themselves – again, debating about whether to engage with – or withdraw from – the far larger non-Christian community surrounding it. Where is the line, they debated, between us and them? How are we to be in the midst of competing cultures, religious practices and beliefs, other prophets and saviors and gods? And into this confusion, again, a vision, a message, a path. God is moving the people beyond old divisions, old, empty categories, John tells them. I saw it in a vision, John tells them: God makes all things new, transcending all boundaries and conflicts. I saw it. I witnessed it. I know it. Into the breach, into desperate and confusing times, John lifts his voice and tells a story. Heaven is wherever God is. And God is here, with us, with all.

And again for a third time, this one in the Gospel according to a different John: back before Peter in Jerusalem, back before John of Patmos in Asia – Jesus is sitting at the table with his friends at Passover.

The end is near. The betrayal has already been set into motion. Jesus is soon to be handed over and to suffer unbearable pain. The end is near. So Jesus gathers the ones he loves best and into this growing sense of doom and defeat Jesus raises up his vision, the summation of all he's said and done: "Little children," he tells them, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." That's it. If you remember nothing, if you forget everything – the only thing you need to know when you are confused, hurting, exhausted, disheartened, reeling, unsure, or insecure is this: it's not what you believe; it is about how you live. Find ways to live love and understanding, which together, is compassion. All you need do is live love and to share it, spread it, preach it, proclaim it.

In some ways, *why* the communities we read about this morning are struggling is kind of irrelevant. The thread that weaves through them all, is a moment of clarity – a clear message and direction, a path forward, a command simple enough for the youngest person to understand. In each case, the message comes wrapped in a story, delivered by a prophet – someone who receives the vision and is compelled to share it with the community. "This is what I saw," says Jesus, says Peter, says John, says maybe even old Tyree Guyton from his plastic lawn chair. "This is what God told me, showed me. This is what I dreamed. Let me tell you what I heard, what I know in my bones. I've been given a way through, a way forward. I have a rudder strong enough, faithful enough to steer our boat as we head out into the cold, dark night."

The gift of clarity is a gift that God still gives to the faithful, especially in times of upset or confusion, when the way forward is unclear. We need only listen and watch and be open. Last week I sent a letter to the parish, inviting all of you to participate in a visioning process we're calling "Listening Links 2019" -- a time of watching and listening and opening, into a time of dreaming about our future. As a church, our way forward, while hopeful and promising, is unclear. Everything is changing. And in this regard Trinity is neither alone nor unique. All around us patterns of affiliation and giving, engagement and participation are shifting. In her book, The Great Emergence, Phyllis Tickle reminds us that throughout history, every 500 years or so, the Christian Church has experienced what she describes as a "massive garage sale" – everything changes, is renegotiated, most of the old is questioned or torn down and eventually, something beautiful and strengthened and renewed emerges in its place. "We're in one of those garage sale eras right now, in this moment in history" she writes. Even the most cursory glance at the Pew Research Center website confirms her hypothesis. And we know it to be true here at Trinity.

But the fact is that despite these shifting sands, God is more present and stronger than ever, and God's mission is more needed than ever. So the question is not so much: does our church have a mission? The question is: does God's mission have a church? Are we listening to what God is calling us to do and be? In the face of so much change swirling ever about us, pressing in on our doors, creating anxiety and uncertainty, who, exactly are we as a church? What do we most deeply value? How will we best follow Jesus? Where are we heading?

Over the summer months, we will ask ourselves these questions and we will listen to each other – uncovering each other’s values, passions, and interests, mining the depths for visions and dreams and unlikely prophets. And into these ponderings, into this deep listening will come, I am sure of it, some form of *clarity*, some kind of direction for charting our collective course into the future. AMEN.

Sources:

“The Rise and Fall of Heidelberg Street,” *New York Times Magazine*, by M.H. Miller,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/magazine/tyree-guyton-art-detroit.html>

“Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 2,” pp. 450-451, 462-465, 468-471.