

Seventh Sunday of Easter, A
Acts 1:6-14
John 17:1-1

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I've been focused on watching positive shows these days, and one of my favorites is an online series called *Some Good News*, hosted by the actor John Krasinski. His premise is that no matter how dark things get, there is always some good news to be found.

People send him good news videos from all around the world, but there's one clip I can't forget. It's a video greeting from the International Space Station, last month when two American astronauts were preparing to return home from a long stay in space. Can you imagine that transition? To go from literally flying high in one of the most privileged and awesome experiences a human being can have... to touching down in the chaos of a worldwide pandemic.

The space station video finishes with a glorious, breathtaking view of stars and planets and endless black expanses surrounding a glowing earth that shimmers with clouds and oceans and continents. And you hear an astronaut saying: *"Here's some good news. The earth is still beautiful. An earth in crisis is still an earth worth returning to."*

I love that heartfelt commitment to our hurting planet. Even though outer space is vast and glorious and breathtaking, there is no place those astronauts would rather be than home with people they love.

The same kind of heartfelt commitment shines out from today's scriptures. God's commitment to our beautiful and suffering world. Christ's commitment to the human family, broken as we are.

It didn't have to be that way. We could easily imagine the God of all the universe just overlooking our little planet. But instead, the cosmic God -- whose Spirit permeates all stars and planets, all matter, all nature, all creatures -- was so intent on connecting that God entered this world personally, to live with us and die with us, so we can know God forever.

Jesus came to bring the glory of God -- God's magnificence, God's majesty, God's greatness -- to a suffering earth. And near the end of his life, just before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all the people he had touched, and all who would follow him later on, to keep on showing God's glory through their lives. He was praying for you and me.

That word “glory” can be a little hard to relate to. Glory isn’t something most of us aspire to. When we do see people seeking glory for themselves, we distrust them. In public life, people fight for the limelight, seek attention, put themselves up in order to put others down. We can see how destructive it is, in a time of desperate human need.

Time after time in John’s gospel, Jesus warns against seeking our own glory. True glory doesn’t come from humans, but from God. And how was God’s glory and greatness shown in Jesus? Not through spectacular miracles or attention-grabbing stunts. Not through media blitzes or popularity contests.

God’s glory was shown in Jesus’s humble, healing actions. Healing the sick. Feeding the hungry. Making wounded people whole. Welcoming outsiders, weaving them into a new community where people are one with each other and one with God. In John’s gospel, God’s glory shines most fully on the cross, where Jesus gave his life for the world, the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep.

The great mystery is how deeply God’s glory is connected with suffering – and with serving, acting for the good of others. God’s majesty and magnificence is never above and apart, like a space station surveying earth from afar. God’s glory is always grounded on the earth, close to those who suffer, always about mercy and love lived out.

Jesus prayed that we would be one – not divided by glory-seeking but united in servant love. Today we see a small number of church leaders grabbing headlines with lawsuits and protests against public health measures that limit religious gatherings, which they say infringe on their rights. But the vast majority of church people are not pressing for their personal rights right now– instead they are carefully considering the whole community’s safety when they think about reopening. Hundreds of leaders (including your pastors) have signed a public statement from Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon – saying our sacred duty is to promote the health of all our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable, those who are older, those in marginalized communities hit so hard by this virus. Whatever happens to one of us impacts all of us. That’s biblical. That’s the loving unity Jesus prayed for us. (Common Table Reopening Statement, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, 5/20/2020 <https://www.commonableoregon.org/reopening-statement>)

Even a simple matter like wearing face masks can become either a sign of human unity or division. I am personally struck by how often I’ve heard the word “love” used around this practice, in our public life. It is often being said that wearing a mask is an act of love toward people we don’t even know. A mask doesn’t protect me – it protects you. It honors the worth of every person God values and loves.

Showing God's glory is about working love the way God works love. Working unity the way God works unity. God's glory is still being shown today, at ground level, through ordinary people who reflect God's character.

I've been reading a lot of obituaries lately. We have lost close to a hundred thousand Americans to this virus, leaving families torn apart and grieving. On this Memorial Day weekend we lift them up to remember. Because even in the midst of terrible pain and loss, there is a blessing that comes when their stories are told.

There's a blessing in appreciating how God's glory has found a way to shine through each person's life and talents and circumstances.

This week we lost a person who was pretty famous but I had never heard of. Annie Glenn, the wife of John Glenn, the senator and astronaut, died at age 100 from Covid-19. When her husband became famous, Annie shied away from the spotlight because she had a severe stutter. Through intensive treatment she gained skills to speak more freely, and for the rest of her days, Annie became a powerful advocate for people with speech disabilities. She's honored as a pioneer in this field. (*Oregonian*, 5/20/20)

To me, this is God's glory shining. This is a life that glorifies the Creator and gives life to others.

I read about Marie Pino, a member of the Navajo Nation who taught elementary and middle school for 40 years in the remote, rural area of Alamo, New Mexico. She devoted her life to teaching because she believed Native American children should have the option to attend public school near their home, to preserve their culture and heritage, instead of being sent away to boarding schools that would assimilate them. Marie educated several generations of students in both English and Dine Bizaad, the Navajo language. (*New York Times*, 5/19/20)

I call that magnificent. I see God's majesty in her Marie's work. And through her, God's glory will be manifested for generations to come.

I learned about Paul Odighizuwa, who worked in food and nutrition services at OHSU for 30 years. He was a hardworking and cheerful man, familiar to everybody who visited that cafeteria. They might not have known that Paul attended Portland State University and was a highly respected leader in the Nigerian community of the Pacific Northwest. He was just about ready to retire when he contracted Covid-19. (*Oregonlive.com* 5/15/20)

I see God's glory and honor shining through all Paul's years of faithful work, which was not well enough rewarded by worldly standards. Paul helped to nourish many bodies

and supported a medical community that in turn heals many more. In Paul's humble service I see God's down-to-earth glory shining, even through the sharp pain of loss.

Jesus prayed to God: "Let your glory shine through me." Today, each of us can ask God for that same grace and blessing. To let God's glory and grandeur, God's magnificent love, be made manifest in us. Realizing that what might seem like a small gesture to us is actually a way of participating in God's expansive love that reaches beyond this world.

A woman makes it a point to call her elderly uncle every few days, to be sure he's not too lonely. A man goes grocery shopping for a neighbor. Somebody takes the time to listen to a friend working through their anxiety. A teacher reaches out to check on a missing student. A parent digs deep for patience on a frazzled day, holds their tongue and meets their child where they are. Someone prays for those who are hungry. Someone shares a beautiful video of sacred music on social media, blessing who knows how many people with a moment of peace and holiness.

In countless ways, God is glorified. Human beings are loved. Unity finds expression. We each learn to do our part.

Our world is in crisis, no doubt about it. But it is not without hope and not without beauty. An earth in crisis is still an earth worth investing in. And God is truly invested here, for the sake of compassion and justice, courage and truth, hope and healing, every single day. God's glory still shines, and we get to be part of it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.