

“Vulnerable and Blind – Growing like Lobsters” based on John 17:1-19
Delivered on May 16, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

To understand today’s reading, I want to discuss with you the life of an ordinary lobster. You see, lobsters pretty much will never stop growing, as long as they are able to stay alive. But what allows for their growth, literally puts their lives at risk. Lobsters have an exoskeleton, or an exterior skeleton, a shell, as you know. That shell does not grow with the animal, but rather, when the animal fills its shell to capacity, it sheds it. The lobster ends up naked in the water, but what’s more, the lobster is blind as well. They develop their new shell then, and when they grow into that one, filling it up again, the process begins again.

This is common for many animals with an exterior skeleton, but what I learned about lobsters last week that I didn’t not know before, was just how vulnerable a lobster must be in order to grow and reproduce. The lobster will die if it does not shed its shell, so it must do so. And the female lobster’s eggs cannot be fertilized with her shell on, meaning she must shed her shell to just keep the species alive and not extinct. Yet, being naked, unprotected and blind is dangerous. So, for the lobster, it truly impossible to survive, without a major risk, one that to us, looks like it means certain death.

In their book, “The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community,” Pastors Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen, use the life cycle of lobsters as a metaphor for churches when they shed their comfort, in order to grow and survive in our rapidly changing world, by restoring relationships in the church and in its community.

Here at Absecon Presbyterian Church, we are, of course, a Presbyterian Church, and with that, comes a beautiful 160-year-old meeting house, great facilities, and scores of traditions, both as a denomination, and as a local church. ‘Tradition,’ as scholar Jaroslav Pelikan said, ‘is the living faith of the dead, but traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.’ Tradition ties us to the great cloud of witnesses before us, but traditionalism is tied to the mentality that we often hear in churches. We do things, because we always have, often without knowing why.

In the early church, before Emperor Constantine made it legal to be a Christian in the empire, there were no buildings like we have, and gatherings for Sunday worship alone were not the center of church. Rather, the church’s four main points, as we can find in the book of Acts 2:42, are centered the church on the teachings of the apostles (who Jesus is and what Jesus did for us), a common life (or fellowship, a shared life together), the breaking of bread together (which we know as communion) and of course, prayer.

Buildings can help in expressing this foundation of what it means to be the church, as can many traditions, pastors, church kitchens, youth programs, bible studies, music, bulletins, Sunday school classrooms and more. But ultimately, these are just the tools which we use, and some of them would seem foreign to Christians, in other times and places. The church is constantly adapting, and these represent where we are as a result of adaptations.

These things are our exoskeleton, they are our shell, that comfort and protect us in our faith, and unlike the lobster, we can at least adjust these things to still grow and reproduce our faith. We don't have to jettison all and grow anew, but like the lobster, growth may require doing without one thing or another, and us feeling a vulnerable discomfort, unable to see what is coming next. But in order to grow into God's call for us, this can be necessary.

In fact, the scripture we read today, shows us this very truth. Jesus has just told the apostles they will be scattered. Soon they will be vulnerable, unable to see Jesus. Once Jesus ascends to heaven, the apostles will not be able to bring him back. They will miss walking from town to town, watching him teach and perform miracles. Everything about ministry will change for them – they will now be in charge. For the Apostles, the good old days were about to go away. What's more, they had become co-conspirators of an executed leader, marking them for potentially the same fate of Jesus's crucifixion. Not having a visible, physical Jesus will be a risk to them, but for the church to grow, it was necessary.

By all gospel accounts, the disciples of Jesus numbered between 12 and 100 at the crucifixion. Think about that. There were fewer Christians that had come directly from Jesus's ministry, than there are currently official members of Absecon Presbyterian Church. By modern standards, Jesus was not a very good pastor. He had so few members. He didn't have a mega church.

Well, actually, after the feeding of the 5,000 he had a mega church. You see, he gave them something apart from himself, and everyone was so comfortable and excited they wanted to make him King so that he could feed them loaves and fish always. But John's gospel shows us that Jesus scared them all away, by saying that he is the food and drink they need, by saying all must eat his flesh and drink his blood. After that, everyone left, without pondering the depth and beauty of his words. And all Jesus had left was the 12, who said, 'Where can we go, for you have the words of eternal life.'

What we read today from Jesus is from his farewell discourse in John chapters 14 through 17, where Jesus summarized his life's work and spoke about what was still yet to come. And in this prayer, we see John highlight five major points that Jesus made.

- The first is that the Father gave these 12 apostles to Jesus.
- The second is that Jesus gave the apostles the direct Word of God.
- The third is that these apostles were protected by God, kept free of corruption and were true to Jesus and his Word. They kept the faith.
- Fourth, Jesus says they are holy, meaning set apart, just as Jesus is set apart, or holy, different from the world.
- And last, that they are sent by Jesus, just as the Father sent Jesus, Set apart, holy, in truth.

Now, I don't know about you, but if this was prayed about me, and for me, by Jesus, I'd like to think that I'd be pretty pumped up and ready for absolutely anything. But that probably wouldn't be the case, because that is not the case for the apostles. After Jesus is crucified, they are absolutely terrified. They are so frightened. They go back to this very same room where

they heard this prayer for safety. It's a comfortable place for them. But it's not where they are meant to be – they are to be sent. In fact, one of those prayed for, Judas, had so much doubt, that he betrayed Jesus and had to be replaced. The apostles replaced him, thus keeping the core of 12 apostles to teach, to take the reins of Israel's 12 tribes, for a new covenant with all people.

I love that this text is only found in John's gospel, because even though it's consistent with Matthew, Mark & Luke, but they don't feel it is necessary to include it in their accounts of Jesus's life. The reason I think they didn't include this in their accounts is that they wrote earlier than John, while all or most of the apostles were still alive. I think timing is everything – John is writing as the last living apostle, and so, as he is aging and nearing death. The church of his day were perhaps much like the original 12, afraid and vulnerable, afraid of a time when they would not be able to see John, an apostle, just as the apostles were afraid that they would not be able to see Jesus. They too feared change.

Losing John was like the church shedding its exoskeleton. They will not see their last link to Jesus anymore, and they will feel vulnerable, without a leader. I believe these words of Jesus were preserved and ingrained in John for his gospel alone for this very purpose, to show that just as the apostles had the Word of God from Jesus to guide them, so too, in this difficult change, and in every generation since then, the church had the teachings of the apostles to remain with them. They, and us today, can trust the teachings of the apostles, we can trust the teachings of the New Testament, as our foundation, our connection to the apostles, and through the faithful apostles, our connection to Jesus, and who he is, and what he has done for us.

The apostles had to shed the exoskeleton, their shell of relying on a physically present Jesus, and the second generation had to shed the exoskeleton of physically present apostles, so that all the church could grow – from the 100 around at Jesus's death – to the 10,000 around the time of John's death at about 100 AD. And so, every time the church has been uncomfortable and stressed, it has come through that stress and grown even more, just like the lobster that grows into its full shell, and under stress, sheds that shell to grow again.

Living under the shadow of the pandemic, which has taken the lives of many loved ones, has been a stressful experience in the church which has affected all of us. It has changed us. We have shed many traditions, including our in-person gatherings on Sunday now for a year. We have missed our once-beloved Strawberry and Apple festivals. Our once vibrant youth programs have been drastically reduced. We no longer have a weekly fellowship hour to catch up over a snack, and with these and many other things, we have lost our sense of normalcy.

But while we grieve the loss of life that we have seen all around us from COVID-19, and we grieve these things we have lost, this stress has helped us grow in other ways – like the 'Good News Express' – where several members have taken the lead to send holiday and birthday cards, and prayer cards, to organize and execute drive by greetings and celebrations. Online worship has renewed the participation of those who cannot get out of the house much, and who have not come through the doors of our church in many years but are now part of the Sunday

worship once again. You have added new routines of making regular calls to check in on each other, special projects like those who made masks, and increased mid-week connections.

Of course, many have still fallen through the cracks, and may feel out of touch, wherever they are. Yet, these are new ways in which you all have maintained our church community. They are new faithful expressions of *'koinonia,'* that Greek word for fellowship, for a common life together, that is far more than just attending the same 'show,' our weekly services on Sunday mornings.

Your session is talking about expanding the scope of these efforts, to include others, to include the people in our community whom we do not yet know, and likely, the people in our community who do not yet know the love of God, or don't know it fully. The elders, deacons and trustees of this church have been faithful, praying for you, ensuring that the apostles' teachings are taught, and albeit, in a way we never would have expected before, we have continued our sacred meal each month, sharing communion online at the Lord's table.

As Jesus sent the apostles, so too the apostles sent the early church into the world. And nearly 20 centuries later, you share in that commission. You share in that sending, to be a sign of God's love for the world, sent into the world around us, called by God – not to be of the world – but to be set apart, to be holy, different for God's sake, as visible conveyors of God's presence in this very broken world.

As the Father sent the Son as a vulnerable baby, to be our God sharing our life to die for us, and just as Jesus sent out the frightened apostles, we are being sent into our world around us to reveal the presence of God in us, trusting that the Holy Spirit of God, the same Spirit that raised Jesus on that easter morning. That Spirit is in us. That Spirit is in the church and that which is our God, is in control.

This past year plus, has been stressful, and we have seen so much rapid change around us, and the shell we have worn in our personal lives, our work lives, and in our church, seems to have been taken from us, and yes, we feel vulnerable and blind. We are unable to see what comforted us before all of this happened, and unable to see what lies ahead. But at least in the church, this is an opportunity, for we have the teachings of the apostles and their example and we know that God uses these difficult times to lead us into new growth into God's will.

So then, as a church, let us remember what it is to be sent, remind ourselves of our mission. The great William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II – what a great time of change, tumult and struggle this was – said, 'The church is the only organization, that exists for the benefit of its nonmembers.' We exist not for ourselves and our comfort, but for the benefit of our nonmembers.

Keep this in mind, the things we are used to are innovations that once brought people to faith. But they were different than the generation before, and so on. I think of the organ. We act as if the apostles had organ music. No, the organ was the hot new instrument, and it was brought into the church. Likewise, the education systems and hospitals we depend on were invented by

the church. I'm not sure there are people saying, 'I'd come to church and believe in Jesus if the music was different, or if they started a school or a hospital.' There may be some, but we need to be more creative than that. What people crave is to see Christ in action and to be in community.

Our question is this: Who can we reach with the good news of Jesus Christ? How can we use the skills and talents we already have, to do something new where we live now – in Absecon, Galloway, Pleasantville, South Jersey – for God's Kingdom?

There are a lot of legitimate reasons to feel uneasy, even afraid, as we regather in our church. Not only is the virus still around, but we have been without each other physically, and that might seem intimidating. We've been without the traditions that comfort us as a community, but as we embark on the unknown, we have something new growing, and the biggest risk, might be trying to fit back in our old shell.

We all feel vulnerable and blind without those things that we think we need to be 'normal,' but like lobsters, we're positioned to grow, not in superficial ways. It's not just about numbers in the pews, but to grow as the apostles did in faith and love, in the fulfillment of God's will in and through the people of this church. There is no one way to measure this growth, but I will tell you how it is seen. It is seen in renewal, in a new shell, new engagement, a renewal of our purpose together, to emerge alive as the church Christ calls us to be. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

John 17:1-19 (NTE) After ***Jesus*** had [***spoken*** of the ***Apostles*** being ***scattered***], he ***lifted*** up his ***eyes*** to ***heaven***. ‘Father,’ he said, ‘the ***moment*** has come. Glorify your Son, so that your Son may ***glorify*** you. Do this in the same way as you did when you gave him ***authority*** over all ***flesh***, so that he could give the life of God’s coming ***age*** to everyone you gave him. And by “the ***life*** of God’s coming age” I mean this: that they should know you, the only ***true God***, and Jesus the ***Messiah***, the one you sent. ‘I glorified you on ***earth***, by ***completing*** the ***work*** you gave me to do. So now, ***Father***, glorify me, ***alongside*** yourself, with the ***glory*** which I had with you before the world ***existed***. I ***revealed*** your name to the people you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you; you gave them to me; and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything which you gave me comes from you. I have given them the words you ***gave*** me, and they have ***received*** them. They have come to know, in truth, that I came from you. They have ***believed*** that you sent me. ‘I’m praying for them. I’m not ***praying*** for the world, but for the ***people*** you’ve given me. They ***belong*** to you. All mine are yours; all yours are ***mine***; and I’m ***glorified*** in them ‘I’m not in the world any ***longer***, but they’re still in the world; I’m coming to you. Holy ***Father***, keep them in your name, the name you’ve given to me, so that they may be one, just as we are one. When I was with them, I kept them in your name, the name you’ve ***given*** me. I guarded them, and none of them has been destroyed (except the ***son*** of destruction; that’s what the Bible said would happen). But now I’m ***coming*** to you. I’m speaking these things in the world, so that they can have my joy fulfilled in them. ‘I have given them your ***word***. The world hated them, because they are not from the ***world***, just as I am not from the world. I’m not asking that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one. They didn’t come from the world, just as I didn’t come from the world. Set them apart for yourself in the ***truth***; your word is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And on their ***account*** I set myself apart for you, so that they, too, may be set apart for you in the truth.’