I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning my name is Rev Beth Hewson and I'm the incumbent at St John the Divine. It is wonderful to know that you are out there and we are here together. Part of my ministry is as a chaplain at the hospital. As chaplains we are met with a variety of reactions when we visit patients. Some are skeptical and not sure why we have come, others are indifferent to us, still others are curious and there is a minority who know what we do and who we are and are eager to see us.

As chaplains we frame our message in part by how we will be received.

In our first reading from Acts, Paul demonstrates this skill – how to look for connections with the person you do not know in order to explore a relationship. Paul would first want to know his audience in order to preach about his passion the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this passage, his audience is the Greeks – who knew very little of Jewish or Christian traditions. Paul stands in front of the Aeropagus in Athens and recognizes that religion is very important to Athenians. There were numerous shrines and altars to various pagan gods.

On one of the shrines is the inscription “to the unknown God”. Paul uses this inscription as a way into the Athenians hearts to share his message about who God really is. In a thoughtful, articulate and clear manner Paul says to Athenians and I paraphrase here: What you worship here my friends as “an unknown god is in fact the God who made the world and everything in it ....he does not live in shrines or is made by human hands.... This God gives life and breath to all human kind and every living creature.

The Athenians are captivated by what Paul says. They listen to his message of how the one true Lord of heaven and earth will judge the world with justice through a man whom God has raised from the dead. Paul never says Jesus name but he does imply resurrection.

And it is in the next passage - that we do not read today - where we hear the reaction of the crowd. Some scoffed and mocked Paul when he mentioned the resurrection, others are curious and want to hear more and still others believe and follow him. The Athenians have different reactions to Paul and the good news.

In our Gospel reading today the disciples have different reactions to Jesus’ message. Some are confused, others perplexed and still others might begin to understand that Jesus is leaving them.

This is not the first time Jesus has alluded to leaving them. However, this time he reassures them that the Spirit of truth will be with them forever.

However, before we go any further, let’s set the scene. This is the evening of the Passover meal...and though the disciples do not know it, this will be their last meal with Jesus.
Even before they begin eating, unexpected events happen. Jesus, their Master washes their feet. During the meal Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. Jesus predicts how Peter will deny ever knowing him. There is an unsettling undercurrent of anxiety, tension and unpredictability. Something is not quite right. We know that the next day is Good Friday but the disciples do not.

It is a poignant moment during the meal when Jesus delivers his message

“ If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father and he will send you another Advocate to be with you forever….an Advocate, a Spirit who will abide in you.”

Pope Francis describes the Holy Spirit as our friend and travelling companion. The Spirit is the spirit of Truth, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of Love. The Spirit gives our Christian faith vitality. Francis continues to say, that the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to know Jesus and his love. The Spirit acts in us throughout the day, during our whole life, as a witness who tells us where Jesus is.

It is this Spirit we received at our baptism. As the water poured over our heads we heard the words -or our sponsors and community heard the words: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. From that time the Spirit resides within each of us.

Jesus wants each of the disciples to live out his love. We might say Jesus wants us to “walk the talk.”

Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick and cared for the marginalized – the women, children, homeless, the tax collectors, the prostitutes and many others and he treated them with dignity, respect and love. Jesus life is one of compassion and service fiercely defending the vulnerable populations. His love is contagious and when it takes hold…… a community of hope is born.

During this COVID-19 pandemic there is evidence that Jesus’ spirit of truth, of life, of love is moving through this community. The Spirit moves us to care for the neighbor next door who cannot do their own grocery shopping, to bring food items for the Food Shelf, to make packed lunches for the homeless at the Pete Palangion Arena Shelter, to ring bells and clang pots and pans each night at 7:30 for all essential workers - the garbage collectors, grocery staff and first responders. There are many creative ways that the Spirit can lead us to share truth and love during COVID-19.

Jesus not only claims that God’s love is true; he also claims it is the source of life. This love is both the source of our lives and the goal of our lives.

I want to share an edited excerpt from the novel “Ah But Your Land is Beautiful” by Alan Paton.

Paton describes a scene that illustrates the life giving power of love and the assurances that God’s love shows us what is most true.

The author writes about a situation in South Africa during apartheid, when the laws prevented black South Africans from mixing with whites.
At the death of a white South African official who had worked within the system to humanize life for the oppressed, the blacks were turned away from his funeral, despite the wishes of the family. It was a terrible insult.

On an occasion following this event, Isaiah Buti, a black pastor of the Hoy Church of Zion visited the white chief justice, whom he had reason to imagine as a friend to his oppressed people.

He asked the judge to participate in the Good Friday Service where the congregation would observe Jesus’ practice of washing the disciples’ feet. He asked the chief justice to wash the feet of a congregant who had been a servant in the judge’s home and cared for his children. The chief justice readily agreed, though he asked to participate in the service without any prior announcement.

When the time came for the judge to wash Martha Fortuin’s feet, the judge came forward and he knelt before Martha and took her right foot in his hands and washed and dried it. Then he took the left foot and washed and dried it. Then he took both her feet in his hands gently for they were no doubt tired with much serving and he kissed them both. Martha Fortuin and many others wept that night in the service.

It was a gesture that set healing in motion, because in that simple extra expression of care, he disclosed the truthfulness and the life giving power of God’s love.

Of course the act became known and the judge’s career was affected negatively, but he had no regrets, because he too experienced the life giving power of love that helps us recognize each other as neighbors and as one in Jesus.

May we experience the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of love that lives in us- it is our travelling companion forever- may we experience it during this pandemic in imaginative and life giving ways to our neighbors, friends and family…and even to those we do not know. As we live out the Spirit’s love we will know that Jesus is always with us. Amen