Easter 6C / John 14:23-29 / May 5, 2013

On the summer nights I stayed at my grandmother’s house, I’d sleep in an upstairs bedroom. From the window, you could see the moon glowing through the tangled branches of a tall pecan tree. It cast shadows on the wall. And late at night the train came rumbling through town, heading toward some unknown destination—unknown to me, at least.

On some nights, I remember lying awake, studying the shadows, listening for the train, and thinking of the future. I had lots of questions. What would I be when I grew up? Where would I live? Would I get married? Have children? What is life about anyway? Does God really exist? And when life is over, what happens next?

Such big questions for a little boy on a summer night.

Now, fast forward about fifty-five years.

I’m sitting in a friend’s home in Mankato last week. Around the table are Alan and Chad and Bernie and other members of a book group. We are discussing big questions, similar to the ones I thought about as a young boy. So, while munching on pizza, and sipping glasses of water or drinking bottles of not-water, our group ponders big questions.

One grabs our attention. It’s this: Why should anyone even care about belonging to the church?

It seems especially appropriate to ask that question on this special Sunday, when you fourteen young people are promising to become even more active in the life of Christ’s Church. You are promising today to go all in.

Why be active in the Church? I mean, a person could just make a promise or two, have a few pictures made, and then never come back? What difference would it make?

I would bet that question has been asked since the Day of Pentecost two thousand years old, when the Spirit arrived and the Church came into being. Why bother with the Church?”

Perhaps that’s the question at the heart of the story from John this morning. It’s Maundy Thursday night of Holy Week. Jesus is about to die on a cross, be buried in a tomb, be raised to new life, and then ascend to sit at the right hand of God. He’s telling the disciples that soon he’ll be gone, out of sight.

The disciples must think: “Well, then, that’s that. It’s all over now. Our faith turned out to be a passing fancy.” But Jesus says not to worry. In fact, faith and hope are just revving up. The Spirit will stay with them. The Spirit will be with them forever. It’s no passing fancy, this Spirit. It’s no moon shadow, it is the real thing, and it will do wonders.

Flannery O’Connor once said that when a person quits the Church that person experiences a narrowing of life, whether they recognize it or not. What she means is this: The Church at its best does something the world cannot. The Church honors doubt, embraces mystery, celebrates imagination, and offers hope and love to all the world. In other words, the Church widens and deepens your view of life. You will see with new eyes, hear with new ears, feel with a new heart of love.

I had an uncle who lived in that small town I mentioned earlier. He was always curious about what life would bring, interested in every new thing.

One day, my uncle bought a new television set. It was unlike any other he’d ever owned. It televised the shows in color. Now, this might not sound like a big deal, but it was then. It was like the arrival of the new I-Phone Ten. As it turns out, my uncle had the first color television set in the whole town. And he was so amazed by it, he wanted others to come and see. He’d invite people over to watch.

The first show I can remember seeing in color was the Tournament of Roses parade on New Year’s Day. Float after float of bright flowers passed in front of our very eyes.

We all sat there, just oohing and aahing. It was like opening a door and seeing the Land of Oz in Technicolor. Until then, we didn’t even know what we were missing. We saw life in black and white. Our world was so narrow. But then, suddenly, there was a new way of seeing.

The Church at its best deepens and widens our vision of life. We see in bright colors. And though big questions still remain, perhaps they will not seem quite so overwhelming now.

That little boy lying in bed, studying the moon shadows and listening for the rumble of the train—well, he grew up to be a pastor of the Church. How in the world did that happen? But as it turned out, the Holy Spirit I was given in baptism was no passing fancy. It kept working on me, shaping me, never giving up on me. It was my Advocate for life. It led me into the Church, the body of Christ. And I’m grateful that the Spirit saw something in me I didn’t see. I’m thankful that the Church gave me room enough and time enough to do something I never thought I’d do.

I guess what happened it: I fell in love with Jesus. I had heard that Jesus love me, because I had sung that song in Sunday School over and over. But I’ll be darned if I didn’t go and fall in love with Jesus. And when you are in love you want to be with the one you love. Jesus says he’ll be where two or three are gathered in his name. He says, “This is my body. This is my blood.” So I figured the Church is a good place to hang out with him.

What I’m saying is: if you hang around church long enough, I believe you will fall in love with Jesus too. And when that happens, you begin to notice things you hadn’t noticed before. You begin to see even the smallest act of kindness for the wonder that it is. Love has a way of seeing love.

On a Sunday morning in spring many years ago, I was preaching, or trying to. It was allergy season. My voice was so choked up, I could barely croak out the words. Early on in the sermon, I noticed a church member get up and leave the nave. Now I know what you’re thinking, but people leaving at sermon time rally doesn’t happen that often. It wasn’t long before this member named Linda returned through a side door near the pulpit. She handed me a glass of water. I took a long drink and managed to finish the sermon.

But here’s the deal: From then on, every Sunday morning before worship, Linda placed a glass of water in the pulpit—just in case I needed it. Now, this may seem a small and insignificant act in the great scheme of life. But no act of kindness is too small. The Church at its best is always multiplying and magnifying acts of kindness in the world. It’s always showing the world a new vision of love. The world isn’t able to do that, but Christ’s Church is.

The Spirit sends you out into the world to bring love. People are waiting for you.

One more true story. It’s about a five-year-old girl who is eagerly awaiting the birth of her sibling. Her parents tell her that this baby is coming from God, just like she had. The little girl is so excited she can hardly wait. Finally, her baby brother is born.

A few days later, the little girl asks if she can be alone with her brother. Her parents are a little uneasy with the notion, since the baby is so tiny, but finally they say yes. Yet just in case anything should go wrong, they hook up a monitor so that they can listen in the next room and come running, if needed.

So, they listen carefully and hear their daughter’s footsteps as she crosses the nursery floor. And then they hear her say the most amazing thing to her baby brother. She says, “Tell me about God. I’m starting to forget.”

The Church at its best will not let you forget the wonders of God. It will help you see life in full color, widen and deepen your vision, teach you about small acts of kindness, love you and never abandon you. You’ll be caught up in the great love of Jesus. And then, glory be, he’ll go out with you into the battered world. You’ll be bringing love and hope and peace. The world can’t give those things, but you can. The world is waiting for you to tell it about God, for the world is starting to forget.

There are wonders ahead of you. Keep your eyes and hearts open. Go in peace and serve the Lord who loves you so.

Amen.