*Homily: “Abide in my love”*

My father’s garden is not what it used to be as a cornucopia in Greece by the North Eastern Aegean Sea. There, the fig trees grow like they might have been transplanted from Eden itself. They grow wild and when mature produce the sweetest aroma. They sustain so much field life that it’s difficult to imagine a pastoral scene without them. Butterflies and tiny lizards, sparrows and finches, and all around them tea leaves and chamomile grow in the higher elevations. In the early morning, when the grandmas or “yiayias” light incense to honor Saint Paraskevas or Paris – my father’s

name - and the altar boy rings the church bell, it’s as if all Creation is answering God’s altar call: “Come, worship the Creator who though greater than our thoughts, nonetheless accommodates Himself to us, His creatures. For all of us and for the world Christ has atoned.” We may then hear what we are meant to hear: the sounds and sights of the universe answering from time immemorial: ‘Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God’s love was from the Beginning. And God’s Word to us in Christ *is* Love.’

The Lord God places before our eyes and ears the most glorious sights and music. As William Blake said, “Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour”. And yet, human beings are far from God’s thoughts and ways. We read about God’s Fatherly heart in Hosea this morning because despite His lovingkindness, his first-born son Israel has broken His heart by committing idolatry; he has sacrificed to Baal. For punishment, Yahweh – the Lord - will not intervene until the arrogance of the elite, taken into exile in Babylon, breaks and they repent. Only the oppressed farmers of Judah have been left behind to start over. Both kingdoms have fallen. The land has been devastated by war and the crops destroyed by greed. The economic and social elite were never satisfied; they always wanted more leaving nothing behind for the poor. This led to a breakdown of trust, unjust laws favoring the rich, people losing the family farm, and such deep injustice that even exile is seen as a better option than remaining behind in what appears as a barren land. The prophets like Hosea are lamenting

Israel’s demise and pleading for her. They are crying out this happened because the people turned their backs to God by rejecting the golden rule to “love your neighbor as God has loved you”.

Though they turned their backs to Him, God does not allow His anger to determine His actions. He proffers love to justice for He is long suffering and His lovingkindness is shown to generations who honor His Name. God will act through His prophets to renew the people’s heart and the nation under a modern kingdom called Israel. But this is a vision of the future that lies generations ahead. In the present, the people must undergo metamorphosis; their hearts must be made clean so that repentance may lead to a radical change of mind – ‘*metanoia’*. How shall they repent so God can lift them up again from the nothing they have become? If the last word remained God’s judgment; it would surely break their spirit. Yet God’s will to love is humanity’s hope so that we do not despair. It leads us to newness of life.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus curses the fig-tree during his passion because it fails to yield fruit. It’s a sign of indifference to God’s loving will. Nature is indifferent to human suffering apart from God’s compassion as His sovereign will. And like a parent who suffers with the child, the Lord will bear it with the people to guide them through the journey to redemption and wholeness. He will act through his prophets. He will send Amos and later Hosea who will look again to Abraham, and in whom he recalls something people had forgotten: something which came at the end of his life and which Moses too would be honored with at the end of his life though he

never entered the Promised Land. The Lord God honored Abraham’s faithfulness. He gave him an honor reserved for prophets: *“Friend of God”: “*Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?” (2nd Chronicles 20:7, NRSV).

The important pastoral theme of *friendship with God* is not lost in the *Tradition of Jerusalem,* something which the Tradition of Athens in John’s Gospel intimates: in the pathos of God, the Father’s pain is felt to the depths as His heart breaks with Jesus the Son entering his passion in consenting to the Father’s will and which will lead him to suffer on the Cross. Words cannot explain why; only that through the Cross, Jesus fulfills God’s will to redeem humankind and to grace us with Resurrection-Life on the other side of its shadow. Who, after all, wishes to follow in the way of Jesus the Christ and so in the Way of the Cross? What consolation, what honor is there for the cost of being a disciple of Jesus the Christ today? And indeed, of seeking friendship with God? Jesus’ own brother James admits the majority shall betray friendship with God when the going gets tough and there is a personal cost. People will abandon God and betray Christ. Jesus’ own disciple Judas did, and Peter denied him twice in one day. James says: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” (James 4:4).

Yet, he recognizes that despite the many who fall away, the few who by faith obey God’s loving will shall ascend like Abraham to friendship with God. Not by their own power but by the grace they receive from God’s own heart: “Thus, the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God.” (James 2:23). Jesus known by faith as the Christ speaks to our hearts this morning: are we listening? He says to us: “Abide in my love”. In keeping faith, we glorify God and please the Father’s loving heart. This is to fulfill His will. Why? Because it is the cruciform shape God’s Incarnate Love – Jesus, the Living Word - takes in our lives which brings hope to our world.

You will not find the word “hope” so much in Paul. That is, as a virtue. That’s because hope transcends virtues. It’s why Paul affirms we move from grace to grace and from hope to hope. It’s the narrative pattern of reversal of life in Christ: life is followed by death which is followed by resurrection and the reason you and I descend and rise with him and through Christ’s passion are gifted with desire for our baptismal promise (Reformed Tradition).

The theologian of the Cross for the North American context, Douglas John Hall said it well: *baptism* by water and the Spirit is not once for all; it is *continuous* because the disciple community is not a finished part of God’s will. *Gospel* is ongoing and so we are called to its livingness. Hope is the substance of our faith because it arises out of the story of God’s cruciform love- the covenant - the bond of love between God and His people.

God-willing, in a week I will go to my father’s garden in Greece by the Aegean Sea. I will examine the fig trees and ponder the effects of World War II, occupation and displacement of people and wonder if the curse of economic hardship and separation from families has ended. I will seek people of God’s good Creation who with courage might still confess Christ and who abide in the love of God. I will see if the fig trees have grown new branches and if the weather has been kind, have yielded fruit. I will wonder about the good people of Maplewood Presbyterian Church who make up a branch of the fig-tree. Then, like my father and his father did before him, I will prune withered fig branches for new life to be born. And surrounded by the sweet aroma of God, I will remember my father at play in the fields of the Lord. I will pray the Jesus prayer: “*Kyrie eleison*” (‘Lord, have mercy’) and remember his commandment: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you”. *Maplewood;* abide in Christ’s love. Amen.