When we come to our passages from today, we arrive into a conversation the theologian Frances Taylor Gench calls “private and anguished...between intimate friends who are about to lose the one who is the center of their life together.”¹ Jesus’ public ministry is complete and he has pivoted towards Jerusalem, knowing that “his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.” Out of love for his disciples, he gathered them, washed their feet, and told them what was to come. But the disciples are desperate to know more, to have answers, to hear how they will fare. Preacher and pastor Fred Craddock likens this moment to “children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see the parents putting on coats and hats. Their questions are three (and they have not changed): Where are you going? Can we go? Then who is going to stay with us?”² So again, out of love for his disciples, Jesus speaks for five chapters - more red letters than any other time in the Gospels - and for five chapters Jesus addresses their anxieties and thus, prepares even us “for continued life in this world in Jesus’ absence.”³

Abide in my love.
Love one another as I have loved you.
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.
You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.
Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

It feels like a cool, refreshing rain even now, too, doesn’t it? Like the disciples, we too need the comfort of Christ’s promise even though we know how the story turns from betrayal to trial to death to burial and - and - to resurrection. How will we continue without you here?

“Love one another,” Jesus says. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Before this scene, before this upper room, John’s Gospel uses the word “chara” - joy - only once and it is John the Baptist who uses it, referring to how his joy is fulfilled in Jesus. But then, in this farewell discourse, Jesus employs it seven times. In the face of what is to come - betrayal? Joy. Arrest? Joy. Final goodbyes? Joy. Crucifixion? Joy.

² Gench, 106.
³ Gench, 106.
No one has greater love than this.

My friend and fellow pastor from my preaching group By the Vine, Rev. Emily Wilmarth, talks about how this kind of joy - this complete joy - “is not merely a source or a cause of delight. It’s not a state of felicity. It’s not even well-being, or success, or good fortune. It’s something more, something deeper. This complete joy is a holistic term. It’s the end result of a process that cannot be skipped or ignored. The disciples will have to work for this complete joy...[because] to achieve it, the disciples must first experience sorrow...to end in joy, the disciples must go to the depths first.”

Complete joy is participatory. It requires us. It requires acts of love.

That seems like a ton of work, doesn’t it? To go to the depths? The suffering? Why can’t we have the joy without the hardship, the light without the shadow, the new dawn without the long night?

Is it worth it?

To love one another is...simple but that is not the same as easy. Some people are easy to love, certainly, but once they grow up a little bit and get pricklier and more strong-willed or hurt us when we get close or say things we wish we’d never heard or make decisions that grow unwieldy consequences...loving one another gets messy. We choose who we’ll love in order to avoid the messiness or avoid the questions loving them will raise in our hearts. We choose to serve others who buoy our comforts and neat little boxes of how things are supposed to be. We choose to pull away because the wrestling we’d have to do with our own selves about our fear, our ignorance, our apathy requires a strength we doubt we have. We limit love. We limit love and so we limit our joy.

But, as Rev. Wilmarth writes, “the commandment to love is not intended to be a burden. It is, instead, the source of our joy. So that my joy may be in you. It is Jesus’ joy to love, and Jesus wants us to know that joy, to share in that joy, too.” Jesus loves us. Loves our strong-willed, smart-mouthed, shying-away, shuttered-in, sincere, silent, shouting, still-figuring it out selves. All our selves. All the selves in the whole world ever since and ever more shall be. Every single one. And that is Jesus’ joy. His complete joy. “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one,” he prays. “I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” Not a burden to love but his complete joy.

Did you hear the story of the pilot whales on St. Simon’s Beach? The fifty or so who found their way to the shore? It is often a mystery as to why these whales strand themselves - it could be they got mixed up with sonar signals or were affected by environmental disruptions. It could also be out of their

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5 Wilmarth.
instinct to stay together. If one of them gets sick or injured, they need to come near to the shore. But they don’t go alone. Because of the tie that binds them all, other members of their community follow the hurt one into shallow waters even at the risk of their own lives.

This is most likely what brought those fifty whales to St. Simon’s, scientists think - this communal bond and witness to the one in pain. As the up to 6,600 pound whales came to the beach, passersby became active participants in the whales’ rescue. Video footage shows people continuously splashing water on them as others pull and push the whales back into the water. There are three times as many people as there are whales, everyone finding their role in the labor of love. You’ve got directors and cheerleaders, planners and muscle and might. Someone called the lifeguards, another the Department of Natural Resources. All are working together and even over the sound of the whales’ distressing whimpers, you can hear successful shouts of joy as one by one, the whales are rescued. Knee-deep, unhindered, fully present love. Love that finds joy in giving, joy in the struggle, joy in a love that does not let go.⁶

If we loved as much as this? As unburdened as this? As quick to act as this?

*So that my joy may be in you, he promised, and that your joy may be complete.*

I invite you to close your eyes and listen to this prayer called, *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*. It was written by then Father Ken Untener in 1979 and later quoted by Pope Francis 2015.

*Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church’s mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.