

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

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Another week through this Easter season, and we are now so close to the end of the fifty days between the Resurrection and Pentecost. As a result, we hear again the message that Jesus wants to leave with his apostles, and thus to leave with us about his mission and ours. And, even more dramatically, we hear it across the breadth of our lections today. We hear of mercy, power, love, commitment, and all these in the face of our own danger and personal sacrifice.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Terry Parsons, who was for many years the Episcopal Church's Officer for Stewardship, called this Resurrection season prior to Pentecost OUR time of REASSURANCE. She worked for the whole Episcopal Church in that capacity from 1996 to 2008, and then 4 years later died suddenly, God rest her soul. There were some powerful speakers and thinkers and teachers in the Episcopal Church's programs offices at 815 2nd Ave, New York during those years. I have been blessed over my time as a priest to have heard some of them speak. I heard them speak because they didn't spend much time in New York, but were carrying out their message of Stewardship and Evangelism and Church Growth to the entire Church. And they were well received. There are many sayings and quips of Ms. Parsons that people still recall and use. As a great proponent of year round Stewardship awareness, she used to say, **We have got to get away from the annual October beg-a-thon!** As well, in leading such seminars and training she would say, **"I promise not to talk about money any more than Jesus did."** Terry, and the Evangelism officer at that time, Fr. Hugh Magers, seemed to be on the same page in this way: that the church doesn't grow, the church doesn't give, the church doesn't proclaim good news, unless Jesus Christ is at the center of the congregation's teaching and leading, both literally and figuratively, spiritually and theologically.

Jesus was real, and alive to these program Officers, and that is who, ultimately, they spoke of. What they did for those who heard them and learned from them and worked with them was provide the ministry of REASSURANCE, as well. That is, you can trust that this Jesus whom we proclaim as Risen from the Dead is in fact alive, and with us now and forever. The message from these Program Officers was simple: keep preaching that message, keep learning what good Stewardships is all about, relearn what it means to share your faith in Christ with each other...why? Because your faithful words and actions are not wasted, and the seal of approval provided by your faith is upon you, and will not

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be taken away. It was and is simple reassurance, at the same time instructions are given for how to do the work even better and more effectively.

This is the season then of Reassurance in the Gospels and in the book of Acts. Terry described this very season in both the now and the then, and what happens from the platform of Reassurance. She said "Jesus has completed his mission. He has become man, born of the Virgin Mary, nurtured in Joseph's carpenter shop, launched in his ministry by turning water into wine at a wedding. He has become a teacher and successfully achieved the true mark of a rabbi of his time, in that he has attracted student - disciples. With the twelve and the rest of the entourage who accompanied them, he has traveled throughout the region, not only teaching but also performing miracles, such as feeding thousands, and healing tens of thousands. His teachings about the nature of God in general and his own claim to be a son of God have so annoyed the established church of his day that its leaders have seen fit to have him killed. He has suffered under Pontius Pilate, been crucified, died, and been buried. He has descended to the dead and, on the third day following his crucifixion, he has risen. The Lord is risen indeed. And thus we say alleluia, alleluia.

So, now, "she says, "what remains to be done?"

And here we are reminded that it is time to prepare for departure. Since the euphoria of Easter, we have seen Jesus. He has appeared to his disciples in a variety of times and places. He has walked with them to Emmaus, from the Tiberian shoreline given incredibly powerful and perhaps so oft repeated and so often irritating fishing advice – like "try over there" --, and cooked breakfast for the fishermen. He has shown his scars to that Risk-taking, but momentarily Doubting Thomas and been known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread.

His behavior is like myself or many of you when you are wrapping up the loose ends of a major project. He is as one going on a journey, packing the suitcases, running through a mental list of details, which needs attention before the departure. You know, considering a departure list for us, that list would include things like turning off the stove, unplugging the iron, stopping the newspaper, arranging for the mail to be held, asking the neighbors to keep an eye on our home, and in other ways trying to assure ourselves that no harm would come in our absence. We might all agree it is more profound and eternal when he does it, but Jesus is doing much the same thing. This season might be considered a time of confirmation, admonition, assurance, and comfort, since the details from Jesus will be love, and counting the cost.

In the reassurance from these gospel stories, we are reminded that Jesus is indeed alive, and that that we will be known as his disciples through our love for one another. It is no surprise then that today's readings are of assurance, comfort, and a glimpse of the realities of the dangers, and hazards and temptations that may come to those who

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go forth to proclaim this good news. Jesus speaks of crucifixion; the Revelation from Jesus to John reassures of His return and the creation of a new heaven and new earth. And then there is the story of Paul and Barnabas, in today's portion from the Acts of the Apostles.

You heard that as he was speaking, Paul catches sight of a man who has been crippled since birth. The story tells us that the man, while listening to Paul as he was speaking, evidenced in Paul's estimation the signs of having Faith. With that being seen, whatever it was, he suddenly said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And, amazingly, the man did exactly what Paul told him to do! A man who had never walked stood up. And the crowd was amazed. They were so amazed that they decided Paul and Barnabas must be gods. You have to remember that this was in a time and place where there were plenty of gods to go around. Even without the Roman emperors who were just beginning to add their names to the list of gods, there were lots of stories about gods walking the earth, mixing with mortals, performing a few miracles, but, mostly just causing trouble.

Perhaps, the crowd's response was not so surprising as it would be today. Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas must have been flabbergasted and appalled at the response to their ministry. There they were, one moment teaching and healing, and then, only a short time later, desperately trying to hold back a crowd from offering sacrifices to them as gods.

You know, I'm pretty sure that not many of us here today have ever been declared gods by those who see evidence of God's ministry through us; even still, aren't we sometimes astonished at the response to helpful and well-received ministry toward others? So what happens as a result of God's work is usually not what we expect. If they thought about it at all, Paul and Barnabas probably expected the crowd to view the healing as confirmation of the truth of what they had been teaching in Jesus' name: God's Love and Power. And that some would believe and be baptized. Instead, the old priest of Zeus' temple is gathering up oxen, garlands, and a crowd to offer them sacrifices!

Now there's a new thought.....

Why are we hesitant to go forth boldly in God's name? Perhaps it is not the possibility of failure. Rather, it may be the very real possibility of success! Not just false humility, but fear of what may come! The whole story of Paul tells us plainly that success in God's work may result in long, tiring journeys, temple riots, jail terms, and hasty departures over, around, or through town walls, just a few steps ahead of persons who seek to do us harm.

The simple truth is that when we are faithful and obedient to God's command, the world changes and that can be frightening.

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This brings us to the assurance part of this morning's teaching as Jesus introduces the third part of the Trinity. Jesus tells his disciples of the Counselor, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send to us. As we have been hearing Jesus say consistently, even though Jesus' departure is imminent, he does not leave us unattended. His instructions are clear. The Holy Spirit will teach us all that we need to know and remind us of all that Jesus has said.

Ah, here then, are our tasks, to learn and remember all that he teaches us. Take note. As Christians, we are called to study, to that process that in "church talk" we call "formation." Unless we are intentional about forming ourselves as Christians, learning Christ's teaching by living them, how can we possibly expect to remember all that he asks us to remember, all that he asks us to do. Except by the presence in our lives of that very Holy Spirit, which they would finally discover on the day of Pentecost. Unless we seek the overflowing power presence of the Holy Spirit; unless we reflect on the love God had for us in sending his son, the love Jesus showed for us in his death, his teachings about that love, how can we dare face the prospect of success in our ministry? The truth is simple in the telling. When we LEARN, When we PRACTICE, when we REMEMBER, when we live what we have learned and what we remember, the world changes. That my friends is the key. And it is also the mission of Jesus himself. And it is our future, if there is to be any future at all. that is when we see the ministry and mission of Jesus in us:

The blind have sight.

The deaf hear.

The hungry eat.

The naked no longer shiver in their nakedness.

The homeless sleep beneath a roof and on a proper bed.

The widows and orphans are cared for and protected.

The wounds are healed; the genetics are brought into the shape intended by God; the abundance of the earth is magnified; we are more and more able to look into the eyes of any person and any thing in the way that our Heavenly Father sees.

That is to say, the Spirit of the Lord will be upon us, as well.

Today, Jesus calls us to remember that he gives to us not as the world gives. Let not our hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. He is indeed preparing for a journey. Soon, he will return to the Father. But he sends to us the Holy Spirit, HIS very Spirit.

It is time. As we are moved by the Church in its ancient wisdom through the season of Easter toward the powerful season if you will of Pentecost, it is time for us to prepare for our own journey into the world, in faith, in the hope, expectation and fear of success; knowing the results may not be what we expect but that God is with us, forever and ever.

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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