



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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HERITAGE SUNDAY, THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 24, 2020
ACTS 17:22-31; PSALM 66:7-18; 1 PETER 3:13-22; JOHN 14:15-21

HERITAGE SUNDAY SERMON

John 17:1-11 *[Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."]

This is Heritage Sunday at St. Mark's, so Dean Thomason was very kind to invite me to be your preacher. Since this is Morning Prayer, I got out my old cassock and surplice, and I'm happy to report that I am still able to button the cincture! Although this is Morning Prayer, I got out my favorite stole.

On a day like this there is a great temptation to be one of those old Southern Gentleman stereotypes on the front porch with a glass of bourbon and branch water, telling exaggerated stories about the good old days. I am actually pretty good at that role. Living now in the place where I was born, my wife Julie calls me "Mr. used to be," because, she insists, when we're

out in the car, most of my sentences begin with "well, over there, that used to be...."

I am going to resist that temptation, and instead let us begin by looking at some of the words we heard earlier from the first letter of Peter: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ...Cast all your anxiety on God because God cares for you. ...But at the same time, discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith... (and) the God of all grace...will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

No one knows for sure, who wrote this – probably not Peter, perhaps one of his group, or his generation, but maybe as much as 75 years later. But the letter indicates there was some sort of serious difficulty at the time, a “fiery ordeal.” A good guess would be some sort of persecution, but which one, and in what part of the Roman Empire... who knows?

This pandemic is a fiery ordeal if there ever was one, but so is every other time. We know that there has never been any time that was not without its challenges, and we know, as the hymn teaches, “new occasions teach new duties.”

I was reflecting on the fiery trials of the past – and you can do that, and they all indeed put us to the test. Some are the trials of war (too many of those), trials of dissent, of social unrest, of disease (who can forget the pain and suffering of HIV/AIDS?), or of the struggles for justice, or of the movements for human freedom and equality.

Each of us has had our own personal fiery trials, some known to others, some known to none or only a few.

One of the few positive things about these days is the sense of unity and shared sacrifice that the great majority of the country feels now. Never have the contacts we have with others, especially via Zoom, felt more meaningful than now.

We are alive here and now. And that itself is a miracle that is good to remember and reflect on. As a young man, my life was ahead of me, and like all young people, I could not wait to live life, and to drink life to the lees. I was the captain of my ship and the master of my fate. But life teaches us, when we’re ready to learn, that our lives are not ours; they are a gift on loan to us. We come into this world by no merit of our own; we have all the gifts and abilities

that God has given us, and our lives are ultimately not in our own hands, as all disease teaches us.

Those of us who are people of faith come to the understanding that our lives are not the fulfillment of all time and eternity and history, but in fact are a part of something far greater than our little histories. Each of us is a child of God, created by God, loved by God, and given the opportunity, not to see how much I can get, but how much I can do to help complete this creation, this world, more into the image that God has for us, and for the world.

When I came here in 1988 I knew that this was a congregation that had been here for almost 100 years, and I learned that this building was not what Dean McLaughlin wanted, and trying to pay for it broke his heart and his life, because the fiery ordeal of the depression led to financial failure, and ultimately into bankruptcy and use by the army in WWII.

But the failure of those ambitious souls who began construction is now our glory. I have been in hundreds of beautiful churches of every style, but for someone going to church to a celebration of life and place for food for the journey, which it should be, then there’s no better place on earth than the glorious space of St Mark’s.

Dean Leffler had a congregation of less than 100 when he began his long and remarkable time.

But by the time I followed Cabby Tennis, this was a place that in the secular Northwest was a recognized moral and religious force in the city as well as in the arts, ever living into the role of a Cathedral as a place of forward thinking leadership and courage in the hearts and minds of people. Nothing makes me happier than to see this place go from strength to strength as it is now.

But we all know that it has always been the members who made this place what it is. It was they - it is you listening to me! - who make any congregation what it is. I always felt a great responsibility to those who came before me, and to honor that heritage by the efforts we made in our time.

If you were here in the '90s you may remember the time I went downtown to hear Maya Angelou. Dr. Constance Rice, the then Mayor of Seattle's wife, had organized an international women's conference, and Maya Angelou was the key speaker. I called up and they told me it was "seven fifty" to attend. When I got there, it turned out that what I thought was \$7.50 was \$750.00; the full conference ticket was all they had. So, I had a moral and ethical decision to make! And so, when one of the name badge ushers looked away, I sneaked in! Hearing her was one of the great experiences of my life. She spoke, sang, quoted poetry for over an hour with no notes.

At one point she said, "I don't care who you are, or where your ancestors came from. Our lives have all been paid for. I don't care if your family came over from Europe seeking religious freedom, or if they came from China to build the railroads of the west, or from Ireland to dig the canals, or in the belly of slave ships to pick cotton; I don't care if they came from the Caribbean to work in the industrial North. Our lives have all been paid for. And when you realize that, when you internalize that just one little bit, you stand up straighter, and you prepare to pay for one yet to come."

Our heritage here, like all relationships, is priceless; there is no measurement for what we have all been given, paid for already. What I am talking about is grace, sheer grace – that we have been given this life, this time, to live – that was the first point; and that

we have been given this place, this heritage – that was the second point.

It's funny how we all remember some things, small things no one else does. When I was in college an older friend grabbed his 8-year-old boy in the kitchen who was running around and around, and putting his hands on the boy's shoulders, facing him said, "I want you to stop and figure out who you are and where you're going." I can see it and remember it as if it were this morning.

That is what the Christian faith is all about. Figuring out who we are and where are we going. None of us knows what the future will be, how we will relate, how this pandemic will affect the church. For the time being more people are going to church on Sunday, going to classes, or Bible study during the week – will it endure? What will Christ's ministry look like in a year, 10 or 25? How will our own faith grow and change?

Our own faith is personal; it is what I or you believe. Some of us are "God" oriented in our faith. Others are "Jesus" oriented. Still others are "Spirit" oriented.

I say this because in his gospel, John is always trying to tell us who Jesus is – from his opening "in the beginning was the word," the word was God, and the word became flesh; the word was Jesus, and Jesus is the human expression of God. John wants us to get it – to understand who Jesus was, so he has Jesus use all the "I am" passages. I am: the Good Shepherd, the vine, the door, the bread of life, the way, the truth, the life.

Today, at the end of the gospel, John has Jesus say, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." This was so important to John that he got his nouns/pronouns mixed up. He meant for Jesus to

say, “that they may know you, the only true God, and me, whom you have sent.”

What John says again and again is that the great mystery of life is love, and love is God, and Jesus is the expression of this love, this word, this spirit. And, this word, this spirit, is in me and I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you, and we are in God.

And so, in every possible way, John says, let his spirit, Christ’s spirit become a part of your spirit. Learn, understand, experience what this love is. Let his love be the center of who you are, so that day by day we increase in his spirit, so that our choices are his choices as we allow Christ to become more and more the center and the purpose of our living.

This is who we are and where we’re going. That’s what the Presiding Bishop has been saying again and again, in what he calls the Jesus Movement, the way of love.

One of those esoteric words we all learned in seminary is anamnesis, the Greek word for remembrance. But that word is not just a word; it’s an idea – the idea, for example, that when we celebrate the eucharist what actually happens is that we don’t just remember the past, from creation to the last supper – but remember it in such a way that the past comes alive in the present, that all the memory of what has happened is alive and present now – not just as memory, but as life and energy and power in the breaking of the bread. That’s part of how and why we say that Christ is present in the bread and wine.

In my mind, that is what we must do today: our past, our heritage, must be more than remembered. It must be made alive here and now so that it may in some way come alive and awaken our spirit, so that the past becomes food, energy, life and spirit for us today.

Bishop Bayne became the Bishop of Olympia in 1947. Later he served the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in retirement came to General Seminary, where I was a student. I remember Bishop Bayne saying that one day, if we’re lucky, we’ll get it, and realize how blessed we are to be alive, to be given this time and this place. That realization, he said, will drive us to our knees... and in that moment we will ask ourselves, “what response can be adequate?” His answer was that there is no response that is adequate, and so the most we can possibly do is give our life back to the one who gave it to us in the first place.

Sometimes in describing a place we will speak about this ministry or that: Pastoral care, education, music, outreach. As we head into the uncharted waters of tomorrow, we remember that the mission is God’s, not ours. There is no such thing as my ministry or your ministry, this one or that one: in Bishop Bayne’s words, “there is only one ministry, Christ’s ministry. We go out to meet him... His ministry is our ministry.” No matter who we are, or where we go, it is Christ working through us, “creating and sustaining and loving and forgiving and inspiring and dying and being born again” in and through all the fiery ordeals.

And, Bishop Bayne said to us, “less than the least of all saints, is this grace given that we are privileged to go where he is, and for a minute to stand by his side.”

What that means will be revealed. But the people of St. Mark’s have stood by Christ’s side faithfully, in all of the fiery ordeals we have faced, and so on this day, we remember our heritage knowing in the final words of 1 Peter that “the God of all grace...will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

May God bless us all as we live into these days, not with fear, but with the confidence in the one who leads us and whom we follow and serve. Amen.