

Pentecost 8, Proper 12
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

July 26, 2020
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God's Work

We spent the weekend in Palouse, Washington last week, visiting our son, Landon, and his family, that includes Gabriel, the Archangel. (Well, so he seems to us, anyway.) When we arrived home, we were eating supper Karisse mentioned that a lone White-Crowned Sparrow was hopping around on the ground under an empty bird feeder. About that time an Anna's Hummingbird checked out our hummingbird feeder, only to fly away hungry. I was overwhelmed with this sense that these creatures were somehow depending on me and I had let them down! They and I were connected, not merely by common creation, but by a community we had built around our bird feeders. It is an intentional community of sorts: I provide feed and they show up to eat, and I get to see them up close and personal. Win-win; except that I had defaulted on my end of the deal. I filled the feeders before we went to bed.

Intentional community lies at the heart of our faith. Our American value for rugged individualism is an American value, but not necessarily a spiritual one. It is true that each of us stands before God and answers to God for our actions, but we also stand before God as a community, for only in community does individuality have any meaning. If Christianity has anything to say to our society today it's that as we are connected in intentional community, and that if we lose that sense of community we have lost it all.

In our lesson from the Apostolic Tradition today we see community at its heart. Paul slips into a rapture about the love of God. Set in context, it begins to take on high relief. Paul writes to Christians in pagan Rome, who daily face the choices of whether or not to make life easier for them by participating in the ritual Emperor worship, or to remain faithful to their Christian convictions and pay the price. To them he writes, "What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?" The list is rather impressive, yet probably things his readers have experienced. But in the background, beneath, behind and beyond all of these things, is this promise that we are in Christ, and in Christ God will raise us up and give us all things.

In Christ we are more than conquerors in all the death that life is dealing us now. Paul's vision is of a beloved community gathered around what God has done in Jesus Christ. This community is grounded in something beyond daily life with all its woes draws its hope and its vitality from something the world cannot give, and that something is the love of God manifest in Jesus Christ. No wonder he slips into a furiously rapturous gush—it's almost poetry.

And it's not really unique to St. Paul. In the lesson from Sacred History we see a young King Solomon, finding that his father's big shoes are a bit intimidating. This chosen people, this formed and structured community, who believe that it is God who brought them up out of slavery in Egypt to be a chosen people, set apart to show the world what God is like, this is the people he is called to shepherd, and he asks for wisdom to do so.

He asks for a lot, and the rest of the trajectory of his story shows that he doesn't always live up to his side of the bargain, for wisdom requires courage, self-sacrifice and most of all, profound compassion. God's promise of wisdom wasn't a magic spell that Solomon woke up with the next morning. Wisdom is not something given so much as discovered after long and arduous searching. A prayer for wisdom launches you on a lifelong endeavor.

That's what you see in the Gospel lesson today. Jesus' rapid-fire series of parables of the kingdom are kind of cumulative, a collage of metaphors: mustard seeds, yeast, treasure in a field, a pearl of incomparable value, and a fishing net. Together you get an image of hidden potential that one discovers after a lot of hard work. A faithful scribe draws out of his treasure house things old and new; things that feel new to us as we discover them, only to find out that the wisdom behind them is really the ancient wisdom of the human race. This is what it takes to become a fully human community.

So where does that leave us?

We are not threatened with being thrown to the lions for our Christian faith, but we are challenged every day, and especially as elections draw near, to tease out as best we can, how to engage in our civic duties in ways that are grounded in our Christian faith and community. The two are not separate, any more than they were in Paul's day, and a faithful response requires the hard work of sorting through priorities and values, and holding them up to the scrutiny of the self-giving love of Christ.

I would offer one thought: The temptation of any given political party to make an idol of their candidate and a demon of the others places before us the threat of emperor worship. Black-and-white thinking, tempting as it is, is not wise and it does not build beloved community. Be open to the voices that speak—all of them. Listen for truth, watch for beauty, sense goodness. Choose with care, insight and compassion. The wisdom of compassion is work, but it is God's work.

We are not threatened with being pushed to the side economically for our Christian faith, but we do live in a world exploding with the coronavirus. It has forced us into isolation. It has forced us online, and the uncertainty of it has introduced a chronic stressor in everyone's life. We are caught between two opposing forces. We can't afford to completely shut down until the pandemic is over lest we starve, and we can't open up lest we risk human lives. We find we must take calculated risks, and the risks for some are greater than for others. And most of all, the risks any one of us take impact the others.

I would offer one thought: The choice to follow the three essential guidelines of wearing a mask when in public, washing one's hands, and practicing social distancing is always before us. To do so protects oneself, but it also protects others. Not to do so may or may not spread the virus—but one never knows. As our Presiding Bishop has observed, the mask is an act of love that I do for your sake. So are the other two actions. Being the beloved community means making sacrifices. The wisdom of compassion is work, but it is God's work.

We are not threatened with being separated from family and friends for our Christian faith, but the death of George Floyd has sparked a national dialog about separation that is long overdue. A little over a week ago the world lost a great voice that has called us to this dialog for many years. John Lewis said,

“We are one people with one family. We all live in the same house... and through books, through information, we must find a way to say to people that we must lay down the burden of hate. For hate is too heavy a burden to bear.”

I would offer one thought, expressed in the words of a poem my sister Carol Shaw wrote, inspired by her experience facilitating a Safe Conversation at her church. She calls us to the hard work of the wisdom of compassion, but that's OK, because the work is God's work.

Holy Ground

Come.
Let me move myself over.
Sit a while
and share with me
your story.

Let your words
Filter through
the cracks and fissures
of my world,
past my certainties and creeds
and the neat arrangement
of my understanding,

until they take shape,
and grow.
Stretch the sinews of my conviction.
Push my inner parts aside.

Let your story hollow out in me
new holy ground
and let me witness
God's eternity in you.

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Meditation questions:

1. Where do you wish you knew the presence of the love of God more fully?

2. Where is doing the hard work of the wisdom of compassion especially challenging right now?
3. How does your beloved community give you an opportunity to share strength and comfort?