

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday May 9, 2010

Easter 6C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the next to the last Sunday in Easter Season. The lectionary, yet again, takes us back to John's account of the Last Supper, I think this is the third Sunday in a row we go back to that Upper Room where Jesus shares his last meal and give his last words to his disciples. For me it is a reminder that the Resurrection and the Cross can never be separated from one another – they are two sides of the same coin. It is also a reminder that the Resurrection and Cross cannot be separated from Jesus' life and his teachings.

Today's Gospel lesson begins with a question a disciple poses to Jesus. To understand the question and why it was asked, we need to know what went before today's lesson. Immediately before, Jesus has promised the eleven disciples in the room that he would not leave them orphaned, promising them that he would come to them. He said, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you."

No wonder that disciple asked how Jesus can he reveal himself to them and not also to the world. Even then people thought literally. The language of John's Gospel sometimes, especially to our modern ears, is as dense as kryptonite. The disciple understands the words as the world does – in terms of physical reality. But John's language speaks to a truth beyond the material – he speaks of relationship with the very Spirit of God - the Spirit that is God's Self. The Eastern Orthodox theologians hold that any true statement about God must meet two criteria: First, it must contain a paradox because the total reality of God is beyond our understand-

ing; Jesus often spoke in paradoxes. Second, it must move us to a sense of awe and wonder. Here, Jesus is talking about the path to union with God – by keeping Jesus’ commandments out of love will enter God’s life through him. You don’t hear this preached much on the television, but there it is – the heart of the Gospel.

Jesus then promises that they will not be left alone, but that the Father will send the Advocate to aid them; *“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”* It is important to note that the “you” is plural. The promise is made to the community gathered before him. It is by participation in the community of the disciples that the Spirit becomes manifest.

Finally, Jesus gives them his peace, not as the world gives, but telling them not to let their hearts be troubled and not to let themselves be afraid. The peace the world gives is tenuous at best. Often in many places it is totally lacking. When we look around, we don’t see much peace, do we? On the night before his death, with Judas Iscariot already gone from the room to betray him, Jesus knows full well how little peace the world gives. He came from a hardworking family and lived among the hardworking poor. Perhaps he spoke these words with a break in his voice and tears in his eyes. He knew full well how little peace there is in their lives. The peace that Jesus gives is communion with God - something that transcends whatever is going on in our world and in our lives. The Peace of Jesus is something that strengthens us and gives us hope and dignity in the worst situations.

Let’s ask ourselves when have we really felt totally at peace, totally secure, totally connected with ourselves? What was special about those moments? What was going on in our lives and around us? Was it anything the world gave us? I don’t know about you, but some of the moments I felt like that were moments when there was precious little peace going on around me: standing in that formation at Fort Dix to get my gear this first night at boot camp, sitting on that Boeing 707 on my way to Vietnam in ’68, living in New York City in the ‘70’s when people

in their 20s and 30s suddenly got sick and died and no one knew why.

What goes on in the world has nothing to do with God's love for us. **God is with us no matter what.** That is very biblical; Israel was reminded of that lesson time and time again. God's peace is the peace of unconditional love. Yesterday, we celebrated the feast day of Dame Julian of Norwich, a cloistered mystic from the late 1300's. She asked God for the gift of a total longing for God's presence. She must have achieved that, for her most quoted words were spoken to her by Christ in a contemplative vision: "I can make all things well; I will make all things well; and thou can see for thyself that all manner of things shall be well."

The peace that comes from believing in Christ is a transformational inner change of heart that allows us to see peace in the midst of challenge. It allows us to know, as Jesus knew, that God's love is present and faithful in all circumstances no matter what the world throws at us. Jesus said that this is available to all who "keep my word." He doesn't get more explicit than that, but viewed within the context of both the Last Supper and his life and teachings, it suggests a life of love, commitment and openness to doing greater things than we can imagine. That's what people seek at church and sometimes church gets in the way. We focus on what we are "supposed to be doing" rather on what God wants us to do.

Our story today from the Book of Acts speaks about seeking God's will and then following through with it despite all obstacles and social conventions. Paul travels at great risk and goes to where the people are to tell them of God's love in Jesus Christ. Mission grew out of prayer. As big a Paul's ego may have been, he knew God's purposes were more important than his.

I think today's lessons give us some instructions for reclaiming our mission:

1. Spend more time in prayer seeking to discern what God would have us do and be. Don't be afraid to test it by talking about it in community. Don't be afraid to act on it.
2. Think beyond the church walls and beyond the community that already exists. Look

where Paul found Lydia.

3. Be willing to share the Gospel message with an unexpected person – most probably someone most in need of hearing it – either by what we say or by what we do.

The motto of the United Church of Christ is “God is still speaking!” That challenges us to ask, “Are we still listening?”

God doesn't always speak through visions. Sometimes it is by what we are willing to see in our own communities. I'll give you an example. A little over a year ago some people saw a bunch of hard-working people in plastic handcuffs and shackles along Front Street with their heads hanging down in shame and despair. Those people saw God's children in those immigrants who had been rounded up from the places they had been working – some for 10 years or more - and responded by making their treatment and immigration reform a work of FACE-Maui “Faith Action for Community Equity.” The week following the raid they had been released from detention in Honolulu and met in our conference room. They were worried about their kids, some of whom were citizens and most of whom had only known life here in Lahaina. They worried about how their wives would be able to cope. Some of their needs could be met; many could not. But one thing did happen. They were no longer alone and they were no longer ashamed. They were treated with dignity. They became stronger and less afraid.

God is still speaking. Are we listening?

Amen.