

Easter 7C 2010

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

This is the last Sunday in Easter and the lectionary again takes us to the upper room and Jesus' last meal with his disciples. Today's reading from the Gospel of John is the end of Jesus' prayer that ended the meal. They are Jesus' final words to his friends and disciples. It is often referred to as the High Priestly Prayer. Here, Jesus is praying for us – those who come to belief in him through the testimony of his disciples. Jesus' earthly ministry is complete and he now turns to the Father as he leaves his mission in the hands of others he has called. He knows his ministry will continue, but he lays it down in confidence and without anxiety for it.

The prayer starts out with Jesus' prayers for himself and it ends with his prayers for us. Jesus prayer takes us to the cosmic level – to the eternal love of God that is, was, and always will be. He asks that we, too, share in his glory given by the Father. It is an invitation into the very life of God.

It was an encounter on the road to Damascus with Christ glorified and the courage and kindness of Ananias on a street called Straight that brought Paul to faith. The wideness of God's love and mercy led Paul to leave the Pharisees and join the people who followed the Way of Jesus. That's how conversion works: being open to letting the living Christ into our hearts and joining a community that supports growth.

We see this process in our reading from Acts where Paul is starting a mission to Philippi, his first voyage to Europe. It is a good yarn about how he, probably out of annoyance, heals an innocent young slave girl soothsayer. Her exploiting owners, angry about her loss of earning power,

bring Paul before a corrupt judge on trumped up charges. Paul and his companions end up in stocks in prison. An earthquake – Bible talk for the presence of the power of God – blows open the doors of the prison and unfastened the prisoners' chains. When the jailer is about to attempt suicide because he assumes all the prisoners have escaped,. The jailer has experienced the power and presence of God and now Paul steps into the kindly role of Ananias bringing the Good News to him.

Did you notice the jailer doesn't ask, "Why didn't you escape?" No, he asks, "What do I have to do in order to be saved?" It's a clear indication that he recognizes the power of God at work not only in the earthquake but also in the behavior of these people who are followers of Jesus. Paul tells him simply to believe on Jesus Christ. We then see a scene of reconciliation with the Jailor and his family and Paul and his company healing each other's wounds. Baptism into the Body of Christ through the Spirit follows.

Today is also called Ascension Sunday because it follows the Feast of the Ascension which we celebrated last Thursday. It is a strange Sunday when we pause to remember and see the power of a Jesus who is no longer physically present and it points to the power of the Spirit of God. Luke's Gospel gives us a wider view into the history of God. For Luke all that preceded Jesus pointed to him as the incarnation of the Creator of an expansive universe, the God of a continuing creation. Jesus is a pivot point in the Creation Story who doesn't leave any writings or organization chart, but leaves instead the anticipated gift of the Spirit. He leaves after praying for his disciples confident that God's redemptive work will continue through them.

When God blessed Moses, it wasn't because Moses was special or deserved it. God blessed Moses so that he might be a blessing to the nations.

Similarly, Luke reveals in his Gospel and in the Book of Acts the transforming power of blessing. When we bless others we spread the love of God that has transformed our lives. When we bless, we awaken and transmit the creative and redemptive power of God and thus become agents of God's continuing plan. I think the repeated telling of these stories is the point of the Book of Acts.

When God's redemptive love is made know in the world by our blessings, the world changes. Biblical history shows that the way of the world is to stabilize into societies that lack justice and compassion. The stories in Acts show that when God's blessings are poured out, these societies are destabilized. The Good News shows the old ways to be frauds and that God's plans call for justice and mercy.

The church has been around now for two thousand years. It has not always been at its best but that hasn't thwarted God's plan. Time and again, new forces arise that speak to our deepest needs and the continuing presence of God that gives birth to new possibilities.

God is still at work in the world today. Last Friday we celebrated for the first time the latest person to be put on the Church calendar - Frances Perkins. Does anyone know who she is? She was a good Episcopalian woman born in 1880 who refused to accept the limitations some would impose upon her at that time and acquired not only a good education but also a discerning mind and a strong faith. She became the first woman appointed to the cabinet of the President of the United States when she became Secretary of Labor in the depths of the Great Depression.

At that time there were a lot of people who held what could be called a theology of righteousness. Basically that means that God gives people what they deserve and thus peoples misfortunes are essentially their own

doing. We still hear a lot of that and it is particularly prevalent when times are tough and not all are suffering. That wasn't the God Frances knew. She held to a theology of generosity. She believed that God intends for a just world and that we are called to be agents of change to bring that into being. It was through her efforts, some would say hectoring, that child labor laws, the minimum wage and social security came into being. We make take different views about how these programs are run, but as Christians can we really fault the ethics that brought them into being?

The paradox the saints show us is that, yes, Jesus has left through ascending to the Father and, yes, Jesus is more alive and present in the world than ever.

Amen.