

Epiphany 3 Homily
January 22, 2023

As many of you know, for about the last year I have been arduously reducing the “clutter” in my office , sorting through all the accumulated paper from so many years ago. That was the easy part of the purge – after all, why would I keep reports I made when a Regional Dean in the early 2000s or old services that seem now to be quite lame but were pretty good for their day ? This clearing out began soon after I retired when I gave away ninety-nine percent of the books that I used to prepare sermons and courses and stuff and now, a decade later, I am working my way through the rest of the library.

I have discovered that the vast majority of my treasures are of a biographical or historical nature, with a few mysteries thrown in for good measure. As I decided what to keep or to send to Julian of Norwich’s Book Nook, I held each volume close and thought of why I bought the thing in the first place and what I had learned from it – that sort of thing – and then placed it lovingly into my “farewell old friend pile”.

This has helped me to remember that knowledge of the past is critical to my understanding of the present and my hope for the future. Each book held some nugget of information that I think I use almost every day as I chart my path through all the vagaries of life.

As I try to wend my way through this series of homilies on past, present and future and US, I realize more and more that one of the problems we have in defining where we are going is that we are fairly ignorant of our story – the story of the Church as it was birthed following the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are all fairly familiar with the gospel narratives of the story of Jesus of Nazareth and have heard bits and pieces from many of the letters which flew back and forth in those earliest faith communities, but we are almost hopelessly at sea in our understanding of the thinking and the forces at play in the initial years following the Ascension because I would suggest very few of us have actually read the second part of Luke’s story, which is the tale of the fledgling Church found in the book we call The Acts of the Apostles. I suggest that each of us sit down, take up a Bible and actually read Luke’s account, for without his insights as to the nature and personality of those men and women who formed their life around the promises of God and their hopes for the kingdom, we are less than astute in our seeing where we can go forward in faith and hope.

So, this week I want to reflect a wee while on those first days of confusion and darkness. In order to do this, we will have to engage a part of our brains that too often is treated with disdain – our imagination. As I write this, I am looking at a good friend of mine I became familiar with on a trip to Disneyworld when our kids were young – he is a dragon-ey kind of creature and his name is FIGMENT - as in figment of the imagination! - and has been the muse for so so many of my writings through the years.

So, I invite you to welcome your imagination and invite him or her to walk with you for a while this day....

We can only imagine what it must have been like for that band of believers who had been with Jesus for three or so years, to endure what they were enduring – the arrest and trial of their Beloved One, of his execution at Golgotha and his hasty burial as the sun began to set and the first star of the Sabbath appeared on the horizon over the golden dome of the Temple. They were a broken, a shattered community of men and women who had lost EVERYTHING that mattered to them – broken in spirit and in resolve; terrified for their lives and hiding behind a locked and barred door; weepers and wailers from the very depths of their humanity; fearful of the present and the future – a people who, like their ancestral kinfolk, sat beside their water of life and wept and wept and wept when they remembered how it had been. Even words of hope from Mary of Magdala and Peter about resurrection could not banish the darkness and some probably muttered about their having been betrayed and lied to; a few left the company to seek companionship and love in safer havens. Here, the gospel narrative varies – in Matthew and Luke, Jesus appears before them in Jerusalem and remains with them for a while. In the tale from John, the fellowship are told to “go to the Galilee” where Jesus meets them on a beach. Regardless, in both versions, Jesus blesses his friends and then ascends, leaving them once again lost, frightened, bereft and confused. In the midst of their anxiety, a voice says to them, “Galileans, who are you standing here looking up at the sky? The same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back the same way you have seen him go. Go to the room and wait.” They return to Jerusalem and are told to “stay in the city” until God acts. Now, their emotional attic is loaded with anxiety about the future – what did it mean that God would act – where, when, how?

Then Pentecost came, some fifty days after the death of Jesus, and shook the rafters and the walls of their hidey-place, filling them with power beyond their imagination. The Spirit blew through the community like a searing wind in the desert, vaporizing their fears and doubts and empowering them to tumble one after the other to hit the streets running, no longer filled with uncertainty but now bursting to bursting with joy, hope and such blessed good news. Luke now offers the first description of this transformed community: he writes, “ They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and held everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2: 42-27)

Like all organizations, cracks soon appeared in the initial solidarity each disciple felt for and with every other follower. As the numbers increased, the demands on the leadership rose and Peter and the others began to make decisions which some in the

community felt were discriminatory of those who came from non-Jewish backgrounds. To resolve the issue, Peter suggested that seven people from the Gentile faction be chosen to offer pastoral and other care to the Gentile converts to the faith. One person named Stephen became the spokesperson for this group within the nascent Church and soon the work of the fellowship in the wider city of Jerusalem became very troublesome to the political and religious authorities and he was arrested and charged basically with heresy. When he refused to comply to their gag order, the authorities took him outside the city walls, threw him into a gully and stoned him to death. Thus did Stephen become the first Follower of the Way to die for the faith – a pattern which many of his sisters and brothers would emulate in the years ahead as persecution of this breakaway sect called Christians intensified. The death of Stephen was to see the rise of a man named Saul of Tarsus who was commissioned by the Temple to travel throughout the kingdom to arrest and return Christians to Jerusalem for trial and possible execution. But more of Saul next week.....

So, we will leave the story at this moment of change and transition. As we reflect this week on these opening chapters of Acts (chapters 1:1 – 8:3), what are we take into our consideration of US ? As I see it, we glean from the narrative that the earliest Church learned the gift of patience and being content to wait upon the Lord for guidance and direction. This was and is developed by the community as it spends time together in worship, in prayer and reflection; it came and comes when the community commits to intentionally wait together. We also discover that the earliest community was committed to one another, seeking what was best for each and every member of the body and created and shared the resources as the need arose in the family of faith; that this service of care was engaged in with joy and a sense of gratitude for being given the opportunity to serve others; that a central focus of the early Church was the sharing of community which went well beyond the sabbath – it is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of when in his blueprint for Christian community which he called Life Together he wrote that “:a Christian feels no shame when longing for the physical presence of a brother or sister” and that we draw strength from one another; that ministry is not the work of One or two persons but of the whole fellowship and that ministry is undertaken not as a duty but as an offering. In addition to all this, we learn that as bodies grow and become institutionalized. Cracks and chasms begin to appear which can harm the body and destroy the community if avenues for healing and reconciliation are not created.

So, this week we got a glimpse of a small fellowship which found its heart and soul in the life and works of Jesus; a family that was empowered by the Spirit of God to be the kingdom-bringers and kingdom-livers for their world; a community which was willing to take risks and if necessary suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune as Hamlet says; that dissent and disagreement is a healthy part of any organization, if mechanisms are present which allow the situation which divides to be dealt with compassionately and pastorally.

As we move forward in faith, I pray that we may rediscover and celebrate all the signs of the early Christian Church which are present here and now in our here and now and rededicate ourselves and our community to becoming who God wants us to be. Amen

GUIDES FOR THIS WEEK

1. Read Acts Chapter 1:1 to Chapter 8:3
2. How do you think you would have reacted had you been a part of the first community in that upper room in Jerusalem?
3. What do you see as the “marks and signs” of a healthy faith family?
4. What would you be willing to do to help revitalize the parish in the future?
5. This is a small part of the beginning of a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer entitled LIFE TOGETHER....
“ The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. In the end all his disciples abandoned him. On the cross, he was alone, surrounded by criminals and the jeering mob. He had come for the express purpose of bringing peace to the enemies of God. So Christians, too, belong not in the seclusion of the cloistered life but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work...It is by God's grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God's word and sacraments in this world...The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer...the believer need not feel any sense of shame when yearning for the physical presence of other Christians as if one were still living too much in the flesh...The believer praises the Creator, the Reconciler and the Redeemer, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the bodily presence of other Christians...:

Do you wish this to be the hallmark of a renewed parish here in Metcalfe and would you be willing to offer your time, talents and gifts of all sorts to make this a reality?