

Sunday, May 29, 2022

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

We find ourselves today at the last Sunday of Easter 2022. In some ways Easter seems like it was just a few weeks ago and other times it seems so far away.

Our texts this Easter season have allowed us to hear from the Book of Acts and the Book of Revelation week after week. John has provided the gospel texts.

We've moved from the act of resurrection of Jesus through John's vision of Heaven, and we've had a glance at what the early followers of Jesus went through as their mission moved from exclusively a Jewish mission to a mission that included inviting all people into God's kingdom.

And as we've witnessed over these weeks of Easter, the mission of a disciples following the resurrection was anything but an easy job, an easy calling. As the disciples travel around after Pentecost, we found out what the world then was like. It was filled with – well, with everything that our world today is filled with. Times change, but people and how they live their lives doesn't necessarily change for the better. The specifics may indeed change but the general situations remain from age to age, century to century.

Case in point – our second lesson from Acts today. As Paul and Silas were walking in Philippi minding their own business and even perhaps engaged in conversation with those who wanted to hear of the risen Christ. He is tired of being “bugged” by this fortune telling slave girl after days of her pestering them. And so, he simply orders the spirit to leave the girl. And it does. And then he and Silas find themselves in deep trouble. As we might say today – no good deed goes unpunished.

They are stripped naked, flogged and then thrown into a prison cell where the worst of the worst are kept. So much for preaching, teaching and casting our spirits.

Yet, we find that very evening an earthquake crumbled the prison. This was an opportunity for the prisoners to escape. Freedom awaited. Yet, when the dust settled and the guard was ready to kill himself fearing the prisoners escaped and he would have been held responsible, Paul, Silas and the other prisoners were right where they were before the earthquake.

And now we learn how God works even in situations where we might least expect his presence to be shown. The guard immediately recognizes that the prisoners being where they were before the earthquake can only be attributed to Paul, Silas and the God they serve.

So he asks how he can be saved. Paul and Silas explain that he must believe on the Lord Jesus. Paul and Silas spoke the good news to the guard and his family. And later they were all baptized – the whole household. And the guard and his household rejoiced.

How many of us are wanting to leave here now and go downtown and start witnessing to those who may not be believers? There's nothing to fear, is there? Piece of cake. Certainly, Paul and

Silas and the other disciples of the very early church had a more difficult task than believers today – or so we might want to believe.

There are any number of questions that arise from our texts today. And one from the Acts text is this - who among us today speaks and acts on behalf of others who are hurting, who are possessed in one way or another? Who is their advocate? Who dares to act in ways that might not result in what we expect?

I have to admit that I've never met anyone like the slave girl in the Acts text, but I have met people who struggle daily with their particular malady, be it physical or mental. They need to hear God's word of salvation, or they need to hear again that God loves them just as they are and that there is help for them and all that they are experiencing.

And we are not likely going to be stripped naked, flogged and imprisoned. But we might be required to spend more time than we would like, we might need to help access resources that might take more time than we like. We might be asked to get more involved than we would like. Period.

Each generation of disciples, of witnesses encounter their own set of obstacles to overcome as they serve God through the people they meet.

We know the plight of many today who may or may not follow Jesus. Yet, they are in genuine need. They need an advocate, who may turn out to be you or me. And perhaps quite unexpectedly. Yet that is the nature of being a disciple, the unknown comes at us without notice and often surprises us. And we move forward one step at a time trusting God to be leading us through each day and each situation.

We trust that when Jesus speaks and acts through us on behalf of all people – it is a life-giving act.

In fact, we find in the text from John's gospel that Jesus speaks in prayer on behalf of his disciples of all times.

This portion of John's gospel is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. And it is largely a prayer that centers on unity.

This text and others that speak to the issue of unity suggest that unity in Christ is not uniformity. The oneness for which Christ prays does not demand sameness in doctrine, lifestyle, liturgical practice, political perspective, or the like. Rather the unity for which Christ prays honors, even welcomes and holds together the fullness of diversity.

And the unity for which Christ prays isn't structural. It does not mean that we need to dismantle denominations – although that might not be a totally bad idea – or shutter all in each local community to form one congregation, which would probably splinter to start new congregations anyway. Structural unity is fragile and does not necessarily lead to unity of heart and purpose.

The unity for which Jesus prays, and for which he gave his life, is something deeper, something much more life-giving and, truth be told, more demanding. Most importantly, it's not something we achieve. The unity for which Jesus prays is a hard-won gift that is forged in forgiveness on the cross, radiating resurrection from the empty tomb and whispering peace into the cracks and divides that form so often and easily among us, calling us to honor and live into the gift through ministries of reconciliation.

Jesus prays for this unity "so that" the world might know that God sent him; "so that" the very love with which the Father loves the Son, the parent loves the child, will be in us as Christ is in us.

In other words, this oneness in Christ and as the body of Christ is a witness to Christ crucified and risen and to the new, abundant, lasting life that he offers for all. One way God loves the world is through the body of Christ with the cruciform, life-giving love of the One who unites us. When we do not honor and live into this gift, we both cloud our witness and distract ourselves from loving our neighbor with the love of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen