

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

June 27, 2021

Fr. Jim Bullion

This I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

Jesus said, I have come that you may have life and that you may have it in abundance." In its essence, Christianity is a celebration of life. In saying that I am reminded of a book published in the fifties titled: *Saints are not Sad*. This is a point that we need to keep in mind. The gospel is the good news, and it calls us into a life of celebration. When religion becomes too dour or too serious, somewhere along the line, it has failed to listen to the "rest of the story".

If we look at the story of the gospels, we see that a major criticism leveled against Jesus by the religious authorities was that he and his disciples did not take religion seriously. That criticism continues in the Church today where there are so many people who are so deadly serious about religion that they would take out any hint of celebration. If we scratch deeply enough, there is a strain of the puritan or the Pharisee in all of us.

Our Collect this morning reminds us that there is a need for a firm foundation. The building up of the church is a thoughtful process. It gains its strength from its beginnings, but as we sing in that popular hymn, the foundation is Jesus Christ, himself.

When we move the church away from this understanding and attempt to make the church the work of our own hands, we know from scripture that we labor in vain. How often we are warned not to build on sand.

Fear is the greatest enemy of evangelism.

One of the most powerful deterrents to a life of celebration is fear. As Chesterton points out, fear is real... "fear does not come from any fairy tale, the fear comes from the universe of the soul." Fear is deep-rooted, indeed, and it abounds where we harbor and abet it. Fear has always been the greatest enemy of the gospel and it has flourished luxuriantly in the church.

Fear prevents us from living life to its fullest and may even propel us into recklessness for fear that we may miss all that is coming to us, while at the same time, it is fear that keeps us from taking prudent risks that we might grow. Fear makes us timid and untrusting; fear makes us miserly and unbelieving. Fear makes us close in on ourselves, forming closed societies, always guarding our doors.

Fear makes it important that we check everyone's credentials; it makes us unwelcoming of the stranger. Fear is the greatest enemy of evangelism. Deuteronomy says, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother." Open wide is a position of vulnerability. It is a position of sharing. There is no room for base thoughts. We are speaking of something much more inclusive than almsgiving or philanthropy.

There was a sign outside a Lutheran Church that said: "Let Jesus into the most secret place of your fear. I noticed that the sign remained unchanged for several weeks and I was accustomed to seeing a new message each week. I wondered about it, but then I realized that each time I passed, I found a new secret place of fear. I learned that there are a lot of them and that they change from day to day, keeping us off guard. It is the locus that changes, the fear remains constant.

If we were more willing to confront our fears, to name them. We would be more able to recognize them for what they are--the product of alienation, isolation, insecurity, prejudice. Fear is the closing of doors, a shutting out, and a shutting up. The cultivation of fear cuts out hope; it precludes reconciliation and stills new life.

How often am I incapable of forgiving because I fear that I will appear weak, or that my desire for reconciliation will be misconstrued, or that I will be rejected.

To live in such fear excludes the gospel from our lives and makes true celebration impossible.

Our readings today confront some of our most basic fears: the fear of death and the fear of poverty. But the word preached and proclaimed today is "Do not be afraid. Believe." In other words, fear is useless, and it must be replaced by trust.

Sometimes recently I have found myself wishing Jesus would just walk into my room, take me by the hand, and say to me, as he said to the synagogue ruler's child, "Get up." I wish I could just stretch out my hand and touch the hem of his robe and feel that righteous energy fill me and heal me and raise me up.

And, of course, he does, and I can . . . because I have you. We have one another. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians in today's epistle:

"I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others... I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something-- now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there maybe a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

In that abundance, we are Christ, one to another; we are Christ to all those around us.

The gospel does not deny the reality of death and the pain and suffering of poverty; yet it does resoundingly proclaim that they do not have the last word. The good news is that love and grace and new life will win out if we can cast out fear.

This casting out of fear is the significance of Jesus coming into the upper room on Pentecost and saying "Peace". It is not the peace that simply means no war, but a deeper peace that casts out fear.

The gospel tells us that fear is not the proper response of the disciple. This was made clear in last week's gospel when Jesus chided the disciples for their fear and equated it to a lack of faith.

Our baptismal commitment calls us into the world so that we may let the power of Jesus work through us. Heed the bluntness of Jesus' words today: "Get up." Even death does not overcome the good news.

We worry too much about "our daily bread." The truth is that we do not understand this phrase in the Lord's Prayer. We worry more about our future bread. Will there be enough for tomorrow? If we look at such concerns in the light of the world's values the answer is: there is never enough. We live in a culture dedicated to more --more money, more clothes, more power, just more of more.

We become controlled by our greed as fear runs our lives. Fear eliminates the possibility of sharing and caring. We fear the reality of death and the pain and suffering of poverty, yet the gospel resoundingly proclaims that they do not need to close the open hand into a tight fist. Fear makes us self-focused, and life becomes a mirror that reflects only me.

Healing, compassion, and life. These are the themes of the gospel today and they are the theme of all gospels. This is the good news. Jesus is present to us as healer; he has compassion for us, he brings us life.

As his disciples we are called to continue to do more of the same; to touch the afflicted, to reach out in compassion, not pity. Compassion, because we are a people who recognize and acknowledge our greatest fears, and like Jairus, we seek out the Christ for help.

We open our hands to others. We invite the troubled and the outcast to the table, not to receive the crumbs, but to participate in the celebration. We say to each other: Come lay your hands upon me that I may be well as I reach out my hands to embrace you.

This is not sentimentality. Many of us are uncomfortable looking at ourselves in the revealing light of the gospel, a light that seeks to illuminate the dark, secret recesses of our fear. We cannot keep our hands at our sides, or we will fail to welcome Jesus himself.

Dom Helder Camara wrote this prayer:

Come Lord! Do not smile and say you are already with us, Millions do not know you and to us who do, what is the difference? What is the point of your presence if our lives do not alter? Change our lives, shatter our complacency. Make your word flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood and our life's purpose.

Take away the quietness of a clear conscience. Press us uncomfortably. For only thus that other peace is made, your peace.