

From Here to There

It's very good to be back home with you. For those who didn't know, or forgot, I was in Minneapolis all week at a preachers seminar. This seminar is an annual event that draws nearly 2000 clergy from all over the world, and it's always scheduled a few weeks after Easter.

When asked why that is, the organizer replied that it's during the few weeks after Easter that most ministers fall into a funk. They get depressed. Even the suicide rate goes up!

All the highs of Easter apparently come crashing down mighty quickly on my brother and sister ministers.

Which, when you think about it, is kind of sad.

Here we are in the middle of the 50 days of Easter, that time from Easter Sunday until the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, 50 days later.

At least during these 50 days you'd think we'd keep the mind bending astonishment of Easter alive?

Especially here at ST. E's.

More than most places, we know something of Easter because we know something of death, and resurrection.

Today after Mass we'll stick around for a while, break up into small groups, and talk about where we've been, where we are, and where we're going.

We know something of Easter because we know that only 7 short years ago, there was a real chance that the doors of St. E's might be closed forever.

Only 7 short years ago, there were maybe 30 people sitting in these pews.

The parking lot was mostly dirt and weeds.

Shim hall was rarely opened, the kitchen almost never used.

All that, barely 7 years ago.

Less than the life time of our little Joey.

7 years ago, you who were here, long before me, long before many of us, you who were here had a dream, you had a vision.

You wrote it down. You spelled it out. It was a look into the future, since the present showed only glimmers of what you dreamed.

You set out a plan to try to get from "here" to "there."

Getting from here to there is exactly where Jesus and the disciples are today.

The gospel scene is the day before Jesus is arrested.

Jesus tells them he is going away.

"How do we get to where you are going?" ask the disciples.

"How do we get to where you are?" asks every church that struggles to do God's will.

We ask it today.

What Jesus tells them, tells us, is that this journey is not one of miles, it is one of the heart.

And because it is a journey of the heart, "there" is already "here" just waiting for us to embrace it.

One of the things I learned in Minneapolis was that before 1750, the most common symbol in art for God's relationship with us is the picture of the baby Jesus suckling at Mary's breast.

I like that image.

You who've been to our home know we have paintings of South Pacific women in all their natural glory.

Our mainland teenage nephews don't know quite what to do with these paintings, but we do notice them loitering around the art work, trying not to be too obvious.

Unlike Tahiti, however, in most of the world since 1750, breasts have been on display not as sacred art, but in pornography and for erotic purposes; symbolizing not salvation, but sex.

After 1750, what replaced the suckling child as the symbol of our relationship with God is another portrait of Mary, but this time, Mary who stands at the foot of the cross.

The symbol of God's great love for us, feeding at the breast, was set aside for the symbol of sacrifice.

In John's gospel, Chapter 1, Verse 18, Jesus says, in the NRSV, that no one has ever seen God, but only Jesus, who is near to the Father's HEART. The NIV translation reads that Jesus is at the Father's SIDE.

But the most accurate English from the Greek is still found in the KJV, which tells us that Jesus is at the very BOSOM of God.

At the last supper, the Beloved Disciple is seated next to Jesus. You've all seen this depicted in DaVinci's painting of the last supper.

The Beloved Disciple rests his head on the bosom of Jesus.

And who is the beloved disciple?

As we seek to journey from here to there, please remember, that you are the beloved disciple: Each of you; and your place is in the bosom of God.

In our wants and in our needs, we are each of us infants at the breast, and God is the joyful mother, eager to feed us well.

And so it is that you who dreamed dreams for this place, 7 years ago, said:

Open the doors!

Unlock the gates!

Welcome the old timers back!

Welcome the new immigrants!

Class, color, aged or young, moneyed or not, immigrant or native, you said: Come!

Having come so close to death as a community of God, you said, we are laying a new stone at St. Elizabeth's: it is the Living Stone of Jesus Christ.

And as the Lord welcomes all, so we too welcome all.

Peter's letter today talks about stones. The Living Stone, stones as cornerstones, stones as stumbling blocks

That's the funny thing about stones you know, you can build on them, and you can trip over them.

And as we here have come back from death to life, with the hard work and prayers and participation of so many, sometimes the same rock that is a cornerstone also becomes a stumbling block.

"Maybe we should lock some of the doors again."

"Maybe we aren't attracting the right kind of people."

"Maybe we're using our buildings, our grounds, our staff too much."

We will talk about these things today.

My hope is to move our discussions from outside in the parking lot to inside into God's house, since, coming in here, in the presence of the cross, having just shared in his sacred body and blood; well, it's a good place to be when we reflect on who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

It's a good place to be when we wonder about getting from here to there.

It's good to let all of our words, our wishes, and especially our anxieties to be tested against the Living Stone that is Jesus Christ.

The brand new church, 2000 years ago, faced the same questions we face today.

Who's in?

Who's out?

There were plenty of newcomers then too. Some who had mighty strange habits.

Some who were lazy. Some not so bright. Some just completely different.

Some who had a lot, and some who wouldn't share, and some who didn't care to mingle with that kind of folk.

The first lesson today tells the same story, only here it is the ***Jewish people*** deciding who's in and who's out.

If you follow Jesus, you're most definitely out.

Stephen, the first martyr, dies as proof of that.

In the second lesson, we hear from Peter.

Peter was flummoxed for the longest time about whether hot dog eaters are allowed in, or smelly people, or if uppity Greeks, with all of their manhood still intact, were membership worthy.

Peter, poor dim witted, short sighted Peter (my patron saint) finally gets the message. And what he discovers is that out of the resurrection of Jesus, a new family is being born. It's not Haole or Chinese or Polynesian.

It's not brown or white.

It's Haole **and** Chinese **and** Polynesian **and** so much more. It grows not out of the blood of families, but out of the blood of Christ.

It's who we are today, 7 years after our near death experience.

Look around.

Look around at Chinese yes, Haole yes, and Filipino and Hawaiian and Japanese and Tongan and African American and more.

Peter finally gets it and he says to you, he says to me: "God is the host, we are each of us guests."

We are here because the resurrection is not only a mind numbing astonishment that came and went 2000 years ago.

We are here because Paul, who the murderers of Steven took marching orders from, got knocked to the ground and into the service of the Kingdom of God.

We are here because Peter is time and again rescued from prisons and chains so he can continue to spread the good news that death is defeated.

We are here because the saints and martyrs of every generation opened their doors, opened their hearts, to people of every place, every class, every color, every creed, and invited them to build on the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ.

We are here because a white deaconess with rich white money extended a hand to Chinese immigrants over 100 years ago, immigrants who were despised and persecuted and rejected by the white population.

We are here because 7 years ago, you who remained had a dream, and you wrote it down, and your vision is coming to pass, even today.

We are here because the Holy Spirit is not finished with us.

And while we came frighteningly close to the abyss 7 short years ago, the voice of Peter echoes through the ages:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once, you were not a people, but now, you are Gods own people.

Once, you had not received mercy, but now, now, you have received mercy."

Easter never ends.

The resurrection is a mind bending astonishment that happens right here, in our very midst. Maybe that's what my brother and sister ministers needed reminding of in Minneapolis. Maybe that's what we need reminding of too from time to time.

And if we snuggle up to the very bosom of God, perhaps we will find, on our journey from here to there, that we have already arrived.

As St. Catherine once rejoiced: "All the way to heaven is heaven, for Jesus said, 'I am the way.'"

+amen