

The Seventh Sunday of Easter + June 5, 2011

Alleluia! Christ is risen ... We've been saying that a good bit lately! That is because we find ourselves in this most amazing season of Easter where the sights, sounds and images of the Resurrection have been in great abundance and will continue through next Sunday, the day of Pentecost. One of the great gifts in these 50 days are the readings from Scripture we hear on Sunday morning and in the daily lectionary as well. These readings describe new life. They help us explore what new life is all about. The image I've used during these weeks is the image of *practicing resurrection*. To practice resurrection is to live in the new reality God has given us through baptism and I know I sound like a veritable "broken record," but it is to live what is described for us in the baptismal covenant – to be part of Christian community and weekly worship, to tell the good news of God's love to others, to serve all people, and to strive for peace and justice in all the earth. This is Easter living. No wonder we fill our songs of praise with Alleluias for this way of living is filled with beauty, wonder and joy.

And ... it can get you into trouble. Sometimes BIG Trouble!

Did you hear the second lesson earlier in the service? "Do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's suffering ..." In other words, dear Christians, do not be surprised if you get in trouble for practicing resurrection. Fidelity to Christ may bring ridicule, rejection and even persecution.

This reading comes to us from First Peter. Scholars believe that First Peter is a series of sermons addressed to the newly baptized, originally set in the context of the Easter Vigil on Easter Eve. I can just imagine these words spoken in that context of the amazing journey of passing from darkness to light and what it must have been like to hear that your new life would be filled with fiery ordeals and suffering. I wondered if it made those ancient converts to Christianity frightened about becoming Christian. Then I imagined what it would be like after being immersed in the waters of baptism to receive the candle (I don't know whether that happened for the congregation of First Peter or not, but I imagined it nonetheless) and the charge to let your light so shine before others ... to let the light of Christ shine could provoke others and get you into trouble.

Dan Erlander, in his wonderfully illustrated book *Manna and Mercy* describes Easter this way: "Jesus and his troublemaking go merrily on!" Jesus clearly got in trouble. His act of mercy and justice saved lives but posed a threat to the prevailing powers. They voted "no" and put Jesus to death. God or YHWH, says Erlander voted "yes" and raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus and troublemaking go merrily on.

This experience was not uncommon for many early Christians. You could be mocked, for being a Christian. You could experience rejection by your family or those close to you. At worst, you could suffer at the hands of the state. You could be persecuted because what Christians did during the first centuries was rather unsettling to the Empire.

Now, the writer or more accurately preacher of First Peter says this should not come as a surprise or be so strange. And, after all, if we are to pattern our life after Jesus, look what happened to him! "Rejoice, insofar as you are sharing Christ's suffering ..."

I am not persuaded that we suffer in the same way. Do not get me wrong. We all suffer. There is the suffering that comes from living in a broken world and takes place from just being human, but I'm not sure we suffer so much because we get in trouble for how we behave as Christians, certainly not like the earliest believers and not like brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

A few weeks ago some of us attended our Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly and among the guests was Medardo Gomez, Bishop of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. Like the church in Rwanda, the church in El Salvador is one of our Synod's Companion Synods. Bishop Gomez' words and presence inspired me. He preached at the closing Eucharist on Sunday and spoke of Oscar Romero. Romero, you might recall became a very proactive bishop who entered into the sufferings of the poor and, as a result, became an outspoken critic of the Salvadoran government. He protested his government's injustice to the poor and its policies of torture and terror. Romero even pleaded with armies to disobey their government's orders because they violated basic human rights. Romero died a martyr when he was assassinated while celebrated Mass in a small hospital chapel in March of 1980. Bishop Gomez spoke of Romero from a personal standpoint. He knew him well. And to this day Romero stands as a beacon of faith and a proponent of justice for all Christians in that land. Bishop Gomez himself has been imprisoned and suffered for his stands as a follower of Jesus, by choosing to be in solidarity with the suffering and oppressed.

The story of these leaders and others Christians is certainly an example of the "fiery ordeal" experienced by believers who get in trouble because of their witness to Christ. No, I'm not sure we suffer in these ways in our little corner of the world. I know that I do not. We certainly are not persecuted for our beliefs. Nevertheless, I'm drawn to these words for First Peter, for even though our context might be different from the earliest Christians or our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world, nonetheless their witness points to our calling. Their suffering is a result of entering into the suffering of others. To be in solidarity with others. And that is our calling too.

That's really what the word "compassion" means. It is to suffer with ... not merely feel sorry for someone or merely be charitable but to enter into the suffering of a sister or brother or a needy neighbor.

What does that look like for Bethlehem or what might it look like for us?

What does that look like for you?

What might that look like for you?

To befriend or be in solidarity with a member of the body or a neighbor who is sick or poor or to be an advocate for someone who is unjustly or unfairly maligned or oppressed.

By entering into their pain or standing beside them will you suffer as a result? Perhaps. It may not be as dramatic as the sufferings of a martyr but you may be ridiculed, shot down, dismissed or rejected. And should that be the case, do not be surprised for you are called – we are called – to share in the sufferings of Christ and to echo the words of our second lesson from First Peter ... humble yourselves under God's hand and God will exalt you. Cast your anxiety of

Jesus, for God cares for you, with God's help resist the evil one and know that it won't always be this way.

The call to enter into the sufferings of others is the call to be human and Christian and I wonder if that's a little bit of what Jesus is praying for when in our Gospel reading today he prays that his followers might be one as he and the Father are one? I think of the passage in Scripture where Paul says that one member of the body suffers we all suffer. In this Holy Communion God brings us together and that becomes the way we live our lives – to be in solidarity not just with each other but with all our neighbors. Martin Luther hits that truth home in these words taken from one of his sermons on the Lord's Supper:

When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship ... here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given to you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, and all misery of Christendom, all the unjust sufferings of the innocent, which which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray and – if you cannot do more – have heartfelt sympathy.

Sounds to me like Easter living ... practicing resurrection.