

May 29 6 Easter 2011

As the disciples begin to realize that Jesus expects them to carry on the mission he began, they seem to have all the fears and uncertainties anyone would have. In today's passage, Jesus offers comforting words and the promise of an encouraging and enabling "advocate" in the Holy Spirit. In fact, all three of today's readings offer comfort and support to a people who are in a transition state.

Today's passage from the Book of Acts reminds me much of what our work together here at Emmanuel is like: Paul treats the Athenians with courtesy and seriousness. "I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship." He didn't stride into their space and begin by tearing down what was sacred to them. Paul took the time to walk around, see who they were and how they prayed. He noticed the altar to an unknown god, and he built on this. Brilliant! His thoughtfulness allowed the Athenians to hear him with open minds. What a lesson for us all. We've all probably had the experience of feeling diminished when someone comes into our communal worship life and immediately begins to change things without learning about us.

And so it also goes for the one who comes into the new place. Those of us who are the "Athenians," if you will, also need to use St. Paul as a model. We

must take the time to become familiar with newcomers. Welcoming the stranger also means keeping an open mind, being thoughtful and slow to judge.

This is the way of love. We must all take the time to investigate the history of a place or a people. Learn about the things that are held sacred. Appreciate the things that others hold dear, even if these things need to be dusted off and transformed. Remember, God has chosen to abide within us – everyone of us. This demands that we treat each other thoughtfully and, as Peter says in our second lesson of the day, “with gentleness and reverence”. We must be patient and reverent with each other each and every one of us, no matter how differently we may worship and praise the same Lord God. We all worship the same Lord Jesus Christ, and we all desire the growth of God’s kingdom.

Peter continues offering to his hearers and to us a look at what our life might be as we follow Jesus. While today’s readings sound, overall, like very good news, Peter reminds us that good news doesn’t automatically mean an easy life. Human nature will always be, well, human, with all the foibles and sinfulness, joys and sadness, sickness and health, death and life that living in the natural world brings. No matter how hard we try to do good things, we all have our weaknesses and we all sin.

Jesus said: "If you love me you will keep my commandments." This is the difficult part of fulfilling our Christian duty. We do love Jesus, and yet, most of us find it difficult to keep his commandments. As I have said before, I believe it is fear that gets in our way. We put obstacles in our way to hinder our attempt to keep the commandments. Pride and greed seem to be among the top sins. We think our individual way is the best way of accomplishing goals.

We sometimes cannot honestly believe that paths other than the ones **we** travel on can or should be considered in our daily and or communal life toward reaching our goals.

But God's love is our strength in our attempt to follow the commandments. Here, we dwell in God's love. God's love is the answer, the Good News, the hope and the joy we receive when we let go of our pride and our greed and our fear. We do not have to prove our self worth. When we witness to God's love, when we focus on the fact that God already loves us, already knows our very strengths and weaknesses and still does not abandon us; that is when we achieve real freedom.

Our readings today remind us that the heart of God is with us not only in our joys, but also in our difficulties. The abiding, strengthening heart of God wraps us in love and compassion when very human things or natural things

threaten to overwhelm us. That love is often seen in those good works we experience through other people: a letter from an American woman living in Japan after the tragedy of the recent tsunami speaks eloquently of the love that overcomes pride and fear.

“The Japanese themselves are so wonderful. I come back to my shack to check on it each day, now to send this e-mail since the electricity is on, and I find food and water left in my entranceway. I have no idea from whom, but it is there. Old men in green hats go from door to door checking to see if everyone is OK. People talk to complete strangers asking if they need help. I see no signs of fear. Resignation, yes, but fear or panic, no.”

This is an example of God’s abiding love pouring from person to person, heart to heart. Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them orphans and they would also be sent an Advocate to be with them forever. God doesn’t exclude those who are different from us, whether by culture or even by religion. The blessings Peter talked about include God’s presence in each of us. God’s spirit stays with us, no matter how we behave. God is there to help, guide, comfort, and love.

Today it *is* all good news. We are blessed. We are loved. We are not alone.