

“The Blessing of Christ”

I. Today we come to the 7th & final Sunday of the Great 50 Days of Easter.

- A. Last Thursday, the 40th day after Easter was the **Feast of the Ascension** and we've heard the scriptures appointed for that Day.
1. Through Easter we have also been following the seven practices of The Way of Love that Presiding Bishop, *Michael Curry* has asked us to consider as a Rule of Life for Jesus-centered living.
 - a. Those 7 practices are: Turn,\ Learn,\ Pray,\ Worship,\ Bless,\ Go,\ and Rest.
 2. In Luke's account of the Ascension which we hear at the very end of his Gospel this morning, Jesus blessed his disciples and “*while he was blessing them he withdrew and was carried up to heaven.*”
 - a. “*...and (they) returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and were continually in the temple blessing God.*” (Luke 24:50-53)
 3. These 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost (next Sunday) are a good time to reflect on the meaning and more, the experience of blessing in our lives and our life together.
- B. Putting this period of time into context in the scriptures' frame of reference, we could say that for the disciples it was both an end and a beginning.
1. It was the end of three years with their dearly beloved master, Jesus.
 - a. It was too much for them to believe this could be over and done with.
 - b. But Jesus had prepared them and he promised them he would not leave them comfortless.
 - c. All the gospels recount his resurrection appearances when he blessed them with the gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - d. So in a very difficult and more than tragic ending, there was the seed of a new beginning.
 2. The writer to the Ephesians reflects on those early days of what was new among the followers of Jesus.
 - a. Writing to the church at Ephesus he describes it as a growing “*spirit of wisdom and revelation,*” an enlightenment of the eyes of the heart,

- b. “to know what is the hope to which God has called you,”
 - c. “what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints,”
 - d. “and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power...”
 - (1. specifically, “*this power God put to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...*”-----
3. These extravagant descriptions at the opening of the Epistle are ways the author reaches for words to describe the new beginning.
- a. For these first Christians it was like a new birth in their relationship with God.
 - b. They discovered in their hearts a new love for God through the “*risen Christ.*”
 - c. They had a personal, and now, a human referent they never had before.
 - d. In their life with Jesus, his teaching, his self-emptying, his death and resurrection -- they discerned the life of God.
 - e. The Anglican Bishop John Taylor summed it up succinctly in the title of a wonderful book, The Christ-like God.
 - (1. The Jesus Revolution as Presiding Bishop Curry describes it, began with the discovery that God, is “*Christ like.*”

C. One theologian describes the corollary of what we call the Ascension from the human side:

- 1. “... *our very own humanity (in Christ) is eternally ... in solidarity with the Divine Reality... Christ’s Spirit, Christ’s life, Christ’s standard of human nature and human action are enthroned in the very heart of Godhead.*” (Norman Pittenger, “Ascension and Whitsuntide,” in Preaching the Christian Year, ed. by Howard Johnson, 1957, p. 193f)
- 2. The Ascension is a way Christians say that God made flesh is a foundational reality about all humanity, you and me, ---
 - a. and even more, ----about all this wonderful creation that has produced you and me.
 - b. It was one of the most frequent assertions by St. Paul in his own discovery of the risen Christ.

- (1. *"We are in Christ...and Christ is in us."*)
- (2. Christians use the word, *"Incarnation,"* but often we've stopped short at the person of Jesus, leaving ourselves out of the equation.
2. In a way we have forgotten, and some say only in our time are we slowly rediscovering,....
 - a. we are one with Christ and Christ is one with God; our relationship with God is a dynamic unity. (Richard Rohr: Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi, 2014, p. 214)
 - b. And the call of God upon us is to move from a state of amnesia and waken to this unity that is ours, that we name, on a level with all creation, *"the Christ."*

II. The Blessing of the Holy Spirit

- A. If we take this perspective of our unity with the divine as persons and as creation, what would we say about blessing as a practice of love?
 1. The first thing we could say is that we belong, everyone belongs.
 - a. When we arrive at birth, each one of us is an inheritor of everything that has preceded us, we are heirs to the whole history of creation.
 - b. John O'Donohue in his beautifully written book, To Bless the Space Between Us, says it well, *"To be created and to come to birth is to be blessed."*
 - (1. He writes, *"Given the nature of our beginning, it is no wonder that our hearts are imbued with longing for beauty, meaning, order, creativity, compassion and love."* (p. 186)
 - c. Matthew Fox sums it up by the title of one of his books, Original Blessing.
 - (1. Each person partakes in this *"original blessing."*)
 - (2. Each person and every creature and all the physical stuff that we call the cosmos is an integral part of the dynamic of divine love.
 2. But of course there are so many obstacles to becoming one with or living into that reality.... that many never realize it is their inheritance -- and so, many cannot believe it.
- B. If it is true that we have this divine inheritance, that we are an integral part of the flow of God's love maybe this is a clue to the scripture's references to the Holy Spirit.

1. The Hebrew's anticipated special king, a *Messiah* as one who would be blessed in a unique way with God's Spirit.
 2. That title in Greek is "*Christ*," the anointed one.
 - a. The Gospels tell us how Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism.
 - b. And we've recalled that Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers,
 - (1. and that he imparted that gift to his disciples at his resurrection.
 - (2. We've followed their dramatic story in the Book of Acts, of their empowerment to pass on the blessing that came from Christ.
 3. What this all seems to say is that the gift of the Spirit of God is like an awakening to the original blessing that is the inheritance of every one and everything.
 - a. The Biblical stories say that it can be passed from one person to another like a flame that is passed and caught by touching the next candle.
 - b. The gift of the Spirit is not like a substance that comes from the realm beyond and fills some foreign material container.
 - (1. It is not something a particular class of people have and not others.
 - c. Rather it is a foundational reality to which we all can awaken---- and we call this gift a blessing.
 - (1. We could call the Spirit the "*carrier*" of the divine life.
 - (2. We may live our lives oblivious to it,\ oblivious to the beauty that surrounds us,\ or maybe just immune to it,\ blocking it off by habit and thought processes, or perhaps out of some bitterness we hold on to.
 - (3. But no matter what one's pain or suffering, no one can rob you of this divine dignity.
 - (4. O'Donohue describes it as "*the invisible light that renders the whole world visible*" (p. 187).
- C. To be people who bless, we must discover and nurture the Spirit in ourselves to love and confer blessings to others.
1. The Christ mystery becomes very practical when we move from what is external to the realm of relationships.
 - a. Theological or institutional sources are important because at their best, they can convey living traditions.

- b. The many ways we support social programs and political work for justice are essential to uphold the dignity of all people.
- (1. These actions are steps along the way but by themselves they do not tap the source where we discover the heart of blessing that grants new hope and new life.
 - (2. Maybe you've heard characterizations of the Episcopal Church in times past as the Republican Party at prayer,\ or more recently,\ the Democratic Party of social action or Identity politics,\ implying that there was little difference.
- c. Going a step further we must discover our connection with Christ with the discovery of our deepest selves.
- (1. *"Mystics like Hilsum, Jung, Augustine, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton and many others seem to equate the discovery of their own souls with the very discovery of God."*
 - (2. *"It takes much of our life, much lived experience, to trust and allow such a process. But when it comes, it will feel like a calm and humble ability to quietly trust yourself and trust God at the same time."* (Richard Rohr, Online Daily Meditations, May 27, 2019)
- d. Contrary to the common misconception, this discovery cannot be relegated to the merely subjective and private.
- (1. Rather, it is exactly here in our capacity for relationship where we tap into the mainstream of God's Spirit,\ Christ in all people,\ Christ in all creation.
 - (2. If you know the lives of these people you can have no doubt of the extraordinary connection they discovered within themselves to the world of their times.
2. Next week we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit blessed those early followers of Jesus and catapulted them on the mission of blessing the world in the name of Christ.
- a. At the critical juncture in human time in which we live, let us pray for our own Pentecost, that the Spirit may be born anew in us,
 - b. that we may know the hope to which God has called us.

The Rev. Canon Lucinda Ashby: Bishop elect, ECR; 6-1-19