

Easter 7, Yr. B

May 13, 2018

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19

This Sunday is different for two reasons. First of all, it's Mother's Day and secondly, as you will have noticed, we're using a different liturgy, one that's from the Anglican Diocese of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. Sometime ago, our diocese established a companion relationship with Masvingo. Some members of that diocese will be with us at our convention in October and there are plans for their Bishop to join us in 2019 as well as some plans to have members of our diocese visit Africa. One goal is to establish a relationship in which we can better understand one another and be of assistance to one another. Another goal is to keep us mindful of the fact that we're a part of this larger communion; that we're all in this together, all seeking to serve Christ and one another no matter how different our cultures and our contexts. It's interesting on this Mother's Day that one of the strongest ministries in the Masvingo Diocese is what's called the Mother's Union. They are 3100 strong and dedicated to work to build relationships with the poorest members of the diocese, doing such things as raising money to help with food, clothing and school fees. They also have some income generating ministries to help fund their outreach; things like sewing school uniforms, raising chickens and doing production of peanut butter. Like mothers everywhere, they are in the business of giving and nurturing life.

I'd like to focus on the Acts reading again this morning. I don't know what strikes each of you first when you hear this reading. What first stands out for me is that business about choosing who would replace Judas by casting lots. They wanted to replace Judas so as to bring their number back up to 12 – and that was because they saw themselves as the new Israel and the 12 apostles would be like the 12 tribes. You'll note that they had two equally qualified candidates, Justin and Matthias. The qualifications were that they had to have known Jesus and that they could witness to his resurrection. So they have these two and to decide between them they cast lots. That sounds really strange to us, I think. But in their context it wasn't. All offices and duties in the Temple were filled in this way. Apparently what they did is to put the names of the candidates on stones, put all the stones into some kind of vessel and shook it. Whichever one fell out was the one chosen. I must have been scarred in my earlier life by not being picked for something, because I felt pretty sympathetic toward Justus. What's interesting here, though, is that commentators point out that neither Matthias nor Justus is even mentioned again. Neither of them became super-stars, or at least did something that was considered outstanding enough to be written down. And I think there's a powerful point to be drawn from that. Let me explain what I'm thinking.

You'll note in the Acts reading that it says that there were 120 believers. It's been noted that, given the population of Palestine at that time, that meant that there was 1 believer for every 30,000 people. And this was the group that was supposed to spread the good news through the known world? Hmm. Someone has said that if one were to bet on that happening, the odds against you would be pretty big. But they succeeded. So, how did that happen? Certainly it was the action of the Holy Spirit, but as Terese of Avila has pointed out, God has no hands but ours and no feet but ours – we're the ones who put flesh on the good news of Christ. So, given those numbers, I'm thinking that it was the so-called ordinary people who spread the message,

certainly by living according to the vision they had received, that God so loved the world that he sent his Son, that because of the incarnation, all creation was sanctified, that God loves everyone, and that that love conquered sin and death – they must have been the ones spreading that message as well as those named and remembered in the scriptures. Ordinary people, like you and like me. If you think of that definition of saints in the story of the little girl who had been to England and toured numerous cathedral used when she was called to define a saint – that saints are the people who let in the light, then, once again, that's each of us.

An Anglican bishop in Scotland, talking about this, said that there are two basic theologies in the church: one is the theology of anxiety, which says that this life is of little significance in itself, because it's only a prelude to the real thing. We're born only to die. But this theology keeps us preoccupied with death and making sure we're saved in the afterlife; it makes us homeless on the earth. It also says that we're in captivity here and need to be rescued and you end up with people living in fear – fear not only of doing the wrong things, but of believing the wrong things. You end up with things like heresy trials and the Inquisition. The image of God, he says, is that of an executioner and the church is the criminal investigation department. It's a matter of keeping your head down and just getting through life as best and as quickly as you can.

The other theology, though, is the one of involvement. This says, yes, the world is fallen, but it also emphasizes the goodness of creation and the fact that God chose to dwell in the midst of that creation. Grace and the celebration of life are stronger than dread and the fear of death. To this way of thinking, we can be at home in the world, we can reverence it and share its good things. This theology says that God wants our participation here and now in the building of the Kingdom. It says that we're all chosen, we all have gifts essential to God's plan. (Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves*)

That part of John's gospel that we heard this morning could easily be misread to support that theology of anxiety. Unfortunately, in this farewell prayer, there's a lot of suspicion about the "world." It's crucial to note here, that when John talks about the world in this context, he's not talking about the creation in general. Rather he's talking about that part of the world that has rejected Jesus, the world as fallen and alienated from God, the world that's going its own way, the world as characterized by greed and abuse and neglect, the world that's enchanted by prestige and pleasure. That "world" is to be avoided. But the world of the good creation, the world as it was intended from the beginning is to be encouraged and nurtured and worked for; hence the idea of involvement.

There is suffering and even evil in the world and we're bombarded by those stories on a daily basis. You know the expression in the media that "if it bleeds, it leads," or good news is no news." As a result, we can easily come to believe that our culture is a dangerous one; we can come to look at one another with mistrust and fear. But, if you stop to think about it, for every instance of violence or greed or bigotry, there must be 1000's of acts of kindness and tolerance. When I was in seminary I thought of writing a book, pointing out all those instances of goodness, but someone beat me to it. There's a book called *Ordinary Grace*, in which the author tells story after story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things – some big, some not so big. The big things include people donating kidneys or bone marrow to complete strangers,

or going to Romania and adopting children who were HIV positive, but there were also not-so-big things: one of those is the story about kids at a camp for disabled children in which a volunteer rock band was giving a concert. One boy with Down's syndrome noticed another boy, whose name was Danny, at the edge of the crowd. Danny was blind and deaf, unable to participate. Seeing this, the other boy went and pushed Danny's wheelchair to the front so that he could reach out and touch the vibrating bass drum. And when he did, he laughed out loud. And all the other kids joined in that laughter, delighted for him. There were other stories, about people who took sandwiches and blankets to the homeless, or one couple called Mr. and Mrs. Motorcycle Santa who raise money with their motorcycle buddies and then use it to give holiday parties to those who would otherwise not have any. The author said that when she started the book, her friends told her she'd NEVER get enough for a book. Instead, she said, "I could have found enough ordinary grace in each village to write 100 books."

Let me close with some of her words:

"I've learned that ordinary grace occurs in multitudes of tiny actions, sometimes as simple as offering a kind word or returning money found on the floor. Eknath Easwaran, who grew up in India, relates a metaphor that his grandmother told him about the power of ordinary people. She showed him a tamarind tree – a big tree with very small thin leaves. On a hot day, the people of Kerala fall asleep in the shade of that tree. On other days, they seek its protection from the rain. Each individual leaf is tiny, but they are so plentiful and placed so close together that they block the sun and rain like one huge canopy. "Little Lamp, you don't have to look for big people," his grandmother taught him. "Look for little people like yourself, then band together and work together in harmony."

Little people, yes, but no person is ordinary and no act of goodness is too small. The truth is that each of us owns a name that came out of God's vessel; each of us won the lottery; each of us is an essential apostle. Amen