

**Sermon: May 9, 2010  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Texts: Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22 – 22:5; John 14:23-29**

***Living Faithfully in Anxious Times***

As the oldest child – I should have known better. But I didn't. I was nine years old – my brother was seven and my sister was five. We had just moved into our new home after living with my maternal grandparents for several months. We moved into this new home in January - the dead of winter – into a converted summer home. That meant that there was little insulation and the winter winds blew easily through the windows. An old oil burning furnace near the kitchen was the only source of heat; that is when it worked.

My father was still in the navy and would serve the final two years of his 22 year naval career stationed in Brooklyn. So that meant that all of the parenting and household maintenance responsibilities fell on my mother's shoulders. And I guess that made me the "man of the house" at the ripe old age of nine.

We hadn't lived in the new house for more than a week when I woke up in the middle of the night. I was cold – very cold – and so I went downstairs into my mother's bedroom to tell her that I needed another blanket. Much to my surprise, she wasn't there. I checked the kitchen – and she wasn't there. I checked all the other rooms of the house – and she wasn't there. There was no note and no apparent reason why she wouldn't be in the house in the middle of the night.

So I woke up my brother and sister and asked if they knew where my mother was. They had no idea where she might be. And so, together, we reached the only possible explanation as to why she might not be there. Someone must have broken into the house and kidnapped her. We were helpless and hysterical. And in that moment, we faced one of our greatest fears, that we would never see our mother again.

You can imagine my mother's surprise when she arrived back home to find her three children awake in the middle of the night and crying hysterically. There was a good reason why she had left the house. The furnace had gone out in the middle of the night and she couldn't get it started back up again. The temperatures inside the house were falling rapidly. And since our telephone had not yet been installed – the only recourse she had to was walk the half-block to where my aunt and uncle lived, hoping that my uncle could come and get it started again.

It is the kind of childhood memory that you remember and laugh at well into adulthood. And here I am telling you this story some 46 years later! But at the time it wasn't funny – the fear of losing someone you love and not seeing her ever again is not a laughing matter.

I can only imagine what must have been going through the disciples' minds as they listened to the words of Jesus recorded in our Gospel reading for today. In the midst of the Last Supper Jesus is telling them that he is about to leave. Jesus tells them, in the

words we read last Sunday, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'".

These are not words the followers of Jesus wanted to hear. Jesus was their teacher and their friend. More importantly he had transformed their lives. He brought hope into their lives of despair. He welcomed them when others rejected them. He accepted them while others judged them. He gave meaning to their lives and a purpose for their living. The feeling of being with him and loved by him was one that they hoped would last forever. But now, in the midst of this meal, Jesus is telling them that he will soon be leaving them, and at least for a while they will not be able to go where he is going.

They cannot help but be anxious. Peter asks him, "Where are you going?" Thomas asks him, "How can we know the way to where you are going?" Philip says to him, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied". These are the kind of questions you ask and statements you make when your anxiety level is elevated. Anxiety is more than fear. Fear is a clear response to a tangible threat. Anxiety is a pervading sense that something is wrong even when there is no tangible threat. It is that feeling that all is about to come apart or unravel.

Jesus understands their anxiety. He promises them that he will not leave them orphaned. He assures them that they will one day see him again. He gives them a new commandment to love one another as he has loved them. "If you love me", Jesus says, "you will keep my commandments." He assures them that he will ask the Father to give them another Advocate or Helper, who will be with forever." He further assures them that he will not leave them orphaned and that they will one day see him again.

Judas, the other Judas asks him, "how is it that you will reveal yourself to us...?" And Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them." So in one moment Jesus is saying to them, "I'm leaving you" and in the next moment he is saying "my father and I will come make our home with you." No wonder they are confused. No wonder they are anxious. Jesus is there with them. He is a tangible object. They can see him, hear him, touch him. To borrow the words of the musical *My Fair Lady*, they have grown accustomed to his face. His real presence brings them comfort. They do not want him to leave. And no promise of an advocate will calm their fears and they do not know what Jesus means when he says that the "father and I will come make our home with you."

But Jesus continues to try to assure them by saying that the Father will send an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will teach them everything and will remind them of all that Jesus has taught them. So "do not let your hearts be troubled, do not be afraid." I am going away, but I will come again to you. And one day you will understand what this means. So I give you my peace.

We live in anxious times. Rivers of oil spew into the Gulf of Mexico threatening our southern coasts and the livelihood of thousands. We are reminded daily of the possibility of another terrorist attack. The economy remains uncertain affecting whole nations as well as individuals. Our homes are worth less than five years ago. Our pension plans and retirement accounts have taken a hit. Will there be enough money for my retirement, or to put my child through college? Will my job be eliminated? Will I find a job? What is it that we can count on to be there for us when facing an uncertain future? Is everything falling apart: my life, my relationships, my church, etc.?

Indeed we live in anxious times. But it is times like these when we most need to hear the words that Jesus speaks to us in our Gospel lesson for today: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." The words of comfort aren't just words that we hear. These are words that we live here in this place and in this time. Whenever the people of God gather in the name of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, we open ourselves to experiencing these words in tangible ways.

When we enter through the doors of this place we are invited to leave behind all of those things that create anxiety and uncertainty in our lives. When we enter into this sacred space, we see the waters of the baptismal font, we taste the bread and wine of communion, we hear the words of God spoken from the pulpit and lectern. Together they remind us of a God who loves each one of us no matter who we are, or what we do, or how much we have in our savings account. They remind us of a God who seeks to be in relationship with us and to be faithful to us, even when we are not faithful to God or with each other. They remind us of a God who reaches out to lift us up when we are low, who shows us the way when we get lost, who comforts us in the midst of our fear and pain.

Here in this place, we are reminded that the Father and the son love us so much that they seek to make their home in us. Each time we gather as a community of faith in the name of Jesus Christ, we dwell in Christ and Christ dwells in us.

And when we get that, when it sinks in to the very core of our being, when we realize that Christ is with us in very tangible ways, then we open ourselves up to the possibility that we will truly experience peace. It is the kind of peace that allows us to face all of those things that challenge us outside of these walls. It's not that all of those things go away. It's just that we see those things in new ways. We are not defined by our fears or anxieties. They do not control us. We are able to face them and work our way through with the knowledge that we are not alone. We can be comforted in knowing that we have the peace of Christ in our lives, a peace that passes all understanding. We have an advocate in the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all that Christ teaches us. And we have a community of faith that is on this journey with us.

Peace be with you, this day and always!  
Thanks be to God. Amen.