

June 23, 2019

St. John's, Chester Village, VA

7th Easter (RCL/C)

A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Years ago I became good friends with a priest who was serving in the same diocese as me. Though Sam is not his name, that's what I am going to call him. Not too long ago a mutual friend had told me that Sam was going through a very difficult time. I was told that Sam was both having a crisis of his faith and of his life as a priest. This week I called him.

Indeed Sam was going through some difficult times. He said that a few months ago it looked as if his life as a follower of Christ and as priest was at a dead end. He was thinking about leaving his ordination behind and moving on with his life. Until recently Sam had been serving in a medium sized congregation. His ministry had not gone well. Sam hadn't fully lived out his role as the priest and pastor to the people for whom he was responsible. At the same time he had been rejected by many of those whom he had been trying to serve. Sam told me that he knew he wasn't perfect, but wondered how things had gotten to the point at which he and his people were at such odds with one another. Last year he left the congregation.

Every year in Sam's diocese, as we do in Southern Virginia, the priests gather with their bishop to renew the vows they took when they were ordained. In Sam's diocese that event happened about three months ago. Sam said that initially he didn't want to go to the service. After all, why would he want to renew the vows of a priest when he was just about to leave the church. However, as Sam reflected upon his decision he concluded that perhaps he needed to be obedient to his bishop's call to be present. He went to the service thinking this would be the last act of obedience that he would ever have as a priest.

As the service progressed, Sam began to feel very distant from God and from God's people. However, when the bishop led Sam and his fellow priests in the actual renewal of vows, something akin to the miraculous began to happen. As Sam spoke aloud his vows his heart and soul began to be healed.

I asked Sam what he made of all this. This is what he told me – and I have his permission to quote him. Sam said, "When I began to hear the words I was saying about promises and commitments, words I had said years before, I began to realize that I am not alone in this life of faith. Both my bishop and the other priests were taking the same vows. We're part of a community of people in support of one another. But this is very important. Never would I have learned this had I not had my dark night of the soul and then been obedient to the vows."

After what Sam described as a dark night of the soul, he experienced in a healing of his heart that he didn't even know was possible.

Dispirited people, fearful people, and confused people all have something in common: their heart is leading them in directions in which they'd rather not go. Yet, at times that going is essential. In one of his most recent songs, country & folk singer John Prine sings a line that relates to this time of turmoil:

“Sometimes my ol' heart is like a washing machine
It bounces around 'til my soul comes clean.”¹

Jesus claims sovereignty not just over our souls into eternity, but over our lives here on earth. On the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee there was a man whose life had been invaded by evil spirits. His life was not good. The man was even living in a tomb that was intended for the dead. Like Sam, his life was at a dead end. Jesus took pity on the man and healed him. When he did many of those around him resisted what Jesus was doing. Jesus' healing work was too frightening, too demanding and too costly. The swine herders did everything they could, to include begging, to get Jesus to leave them alone.

But those whom Jesus has healed and freed learned an entirely different truth: that his liberating love is indeed good news. They learned that Jesus can change their lives.

Have you ever noticed that when a person has a debilitating illness or a life problem that seems too difficult to solve, frequently there are a couple of strong and powerful thoughts that come into direct collision with one another: hope and fear. Hope collides with fear. We say to ourselves, “I hope my situation will be healed and restored by God, but I am almost afraid that nothing will happen.” You and I know these two thoughts and emotions. Both hope and fear are symbols of our expectations, our visions of our future.

In more than a few ways, the manner in which we deal with both hope and fear are reflections of how we have been nurtured and raised in this world. There are times and places when it is absolutely necessary for us to have fear. Early on in our lives as children we were taught to keep clear of things that will hurt us, such as a hot pan on a kitchen stove. Growing up we collect a catalogue of the justifiable fears in life. That range of fears can span such things as drug and alcohol abuse, reckless driving and the need to get our homework in on time.

However, there are less than helpful fears that sometimes creep into our lives and don't serve us well. Most often those fears have to do with unknown things that most likely will never happen. Early in life we were taught not to acquiesce to the “chicken little” mentality to think that the sky is falling, but we seem to do it anyway. When we do, we can find ourselves in a very dark place in life.

That day on the shore of Lake Galilee Jesus countered fear with the power of divine compassion to bring healing, restoration, and renewal. The man's fears were overwhelmed by the hopefulness of the goodness that Jesus had brought into his life.

¹ <https://genius.com/John-prine-boundless-love-lyrics>. Accessed 6/23/2019.

Jesus was offering a kind of compassion which made it clear to any who would look and listen that human suffering is the object of God's concern.

Despite the harbingers of fear and hopelessness, both in Jesus' day and in ours, we are challenged to be open to the possibility that God in Christ Jesus can bring about in our individual lives and in the life of our Christian communities some things that may seem extremely unlikely.

Today, the central part of the confirmation service is the renewal of our baptismal vows. Earlier the candidates and I spoke about those vows. In the midst of our conversation it began to dawn upon me, as it always dawns upon me when we study our baptismal vows, that to actually do what we say we will do and be what we say we will be is radical. It is the radical thinking and behaving of someone who is part of God's kingdom. As Sam learned about his ordination vows, such vows can only be made within a loving and prayerfully supportive community of Christ-followers. The bedrock foundation of a supportive community is the hope we find in Christ. This is not a hope that we can create, but rather a hope that has been created for us by God in Christ.

Hope is God's gift. The man who was healed on the shores of Lake Galilee found that hope. Same found that hope as he renewed his ordination vows within his Christian community. This morning we proclaim hope for our candidates as they make their public commitment to God in Christ. Thanks be to God that we can be their Christian community. AMEN.