

Second Sunday of Easter

The Power of Love

April 28, 2019

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At the beginning of today's Gospel we find the disciples huddled together in fear, withdrawn from the outside world, hiding behind locked doors. And they are probably also racked with guilt. After all they had all abandoned Jesus in his hour of need just days before. Yet by the end of today's reading we leave them ready to convert the world, prepared to go to the ends of the earth in the name of this same Jesus. What's happened? What has transformed this group of cowering men and women into such bold prophets?

“Peace be with you.” says Jesus as he greets them. “Peace,” “Shalom” it is the Jewish equivalent of our “Good Morning”, but in the context of the disciples’ fear and guilt it becomes a Gospel proclamation not only of great joy but also of profound forgiveness. Peace be with you, my peace I give you—Jesus gift of peace, that we share at communion time, Jesus gift of peace is the gift of the resurrection to the disciples. Jesus returns from the dead, not to demand an accounting from them, not to ask them why they had abandoned him, but to comfort them, to re-assure them that He will never abandon them! When he presents them with his hands and side it is not to show them what their fear has done to him, but to reassure them that it is really him, it is really Jesus. It is the power of such extra-ordinary forgiveness that makes their past life now seem like death. It is the grace of such extra-ordinary love, that his re-appearance transforms these lost sheep into bold prophets.

Thomas missed out however. He was gone the day that Jesus returned. Nor would Thomas be satisfied with the re-assurance of the others that Jesus was alive. Thomas would have to see Jesus for himself, Thomas would need to touch Jesus' hands and side for himself for him to believe that Jesus was not dead and buried.

Now we have always associated Thomas' refusal to believe with doubt. But I like to think that it was rather an expression of the depth of Thomas' own love for Jesus. After all his nickname among the disciples was Didymus, the twin. As if he and Jesus were two peas in a pod. A gospel would also come to be attributed to Thomas that emphasizes personal intimacy with Jesus as the path to salvation.

So I like to think then that Thomas dismissed the disciples report not out of doubt but out of his own grief. I like to think that Thomas was so unconsolable at his death, and so guilty at his own abandonment of him, that nothing short of seeing Jesus with his own eyes and touching Jesus wounds' with his own hands could bring him to believe that Jesus had risen.

Love and presence--these belong together. I'd like to suggest that this is one thing these resurrection appearances in the gospel have to remind us. That where love is strong, mere words will never be enough. But when love is strong, sheer presence can work wonders. When we are frightened or full of sorrow, when we feel like hiding and withdrawing, we need to remind ourselves that what we really need is to be with those

we love. And when those we love are fearful or dejected and we feel helpless because we don't know what to say or what to do , we need to think back to those cowering disciples, and remember that our mere presence, our simply being there is more powerful than anything we could ever say or do.

Pope John Paul called this to be Divine Mercy Sunday, to share with the whole church a popular Polish devotion. What is the difference between justice and mercy? Justice is impartial; its principled; mercy is personal, its about recognizing the individual and his or her own unique circumstances. Its not about letting people off the hook, but about recognizing just who it is that is on the hook, and that people are more than any one act, here that the disciples are more than how they acted that on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Just as with the woman caught in adultery during Lent, here once more misery meets mercy.

Let us even now practice what today's Gospel preaches. Let us turn from Christ's words to Christ's presence through our gifts of bread and wine. And let us hear the words of the risen Jesus addressed to John in today's first reading as also addressed to us:

“Do not be afraid, I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead but now I am alive forever and ever.” and as he says in Matthew “I will be with you always, to the end of time.”