

Easter 6 May 17 2020 Rogation Sunday

The ancient tradition of Rogation Sunday is a day dedicated to the planting season and for the hope it inspires. The name derives from the Latin term, “to ask,” and it is a request to God for a bountiful season, as the crops are planted, for there to be seasonable weather and a full harvest. Among the customs for Rogation was a procession throughout the community. This procession often featured a dragon to personify Pontius Pilate in the lead and the final figure in the procession was a lion to personify the coming of Christ. Another custom developed in these processions and that was the “beating of the bounds,” marking the geographic limits of the parish during a procession of pryers and chanting psalms. These traditions of medieval and early modern Britain and Europe came to the Americas, but over time Rogation was transformed into “Rural Life Sunday” in some strains of America Protestantism.

As I was thinking about our upcoming observance of Rogation, I read a news report about the distribution of food in Berlin at the airport sponsored by the Vermont Foodbank and the National Guard on Friday. Over 1,900 came to this food distribution, many more than the organizers had anticipated, and it caused traffic jams throughout the area. The response surprised the organizers, and yet they have vowed to hold another distribution soon to make sure that no one in our area goes hungry. I think that this ties into our custom of Rogation Sunday, as now we know that not only the harvest must be bountiful for us, but more than ever that we need God’s providence for our world and our lives. We need the power of God’s blessing, now more than ever, to open the hearts and minds of our political leaders and all of us to address the depth of the economic crisis we face and the hunger and poverty that come with it. As I mentioned, Rogation is based on the Latin word, “To ask,” and we must ask God in all humility to provide for the hungry and the suffering, to provide in the midst of the great and almost unfathomable need we see around us. And finally, but certainly not least, we need to ask God in all humility, to empower and move us to greater works of love and justice in the Name of the Risen Christ that we might share the blessings of God’s love with our sisters and brothers here in Barre.

Prayer: Most merciful God, today we ask. You to provide for us and our world and we seek that nourishment in your Word. Grant us this that our lives may be brought into a deeper fellowship and that we may seek to bring your blessings to our world; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

As we note Sunday after Sunday as we gather together online, we find that our world has changed completely, seemingly overnight, and I've used the term "topsy turvy" in every sermon since the middle of March I think, and here we are, still as topsy turvy as we come to the middle of May. There are so many references to the crazy times we live in, to the fear we see around us, and that we might even feel at times, but also to the dedication and courage of so many who have done so much to face the challenges that are now a part of our lives. I think that we might be forever changed in the way we take care of our essential workers, those who we are now aware do so much to take care of us, but whose hard work, sacrifice and all too often low pay, we did not recognize much before. Also we now once again have both a deeper appreciation of our health care workers and the need for some fundamental changes to our health care system so that we can assure high quality and adequate health care for all. But just as interesting to me as these realizations of the necessity and importance of some of the basic components of our social structures, is also the awareness about some of our basic values as well. This pandemic has given us a time to reflect on the what is important to us and what we need as a people moving forward together. These are very difficult lessons, in a fashion, I think, but it is crucial as we begin to head out, begin to venture into the world once more, that we commence thinking about the lessons of the pandemic: what is important to us, what has brought us through this time, what are the things we can give up because we now know they are not terribly important to us. At our last two Vestry Meetings, our senior warden, Philip Moros, has had us begin with an exercise, "what is one thing I miss under the stay at home order, what is one thing I've gained under the stay at home order?" Our answers as a Vestry were really amazing, because it showed that our human fellowship is so important, more important than we knew prior to this experience. Our response also show how important having the time to slow down and think, time to cease being so driven has been for us as well.

In addition to this, though, there is one other place where I think as a parish we are learning about what is truly important to our lives and that is in our dialog with the Bible. In our Bible study on Wednesday afternoons it has been remarked more than once that the scriptures sound different when we read them during this pandemic. Indeed, I've been struck how the scriptures speak in a very profound manner and teach us a deeper lesson as I have prepared sermons for this Sunday online Church service. First of all, as we have read a good bit of John's Gospel in this season af-

ter Easter, we have encountered God's deep love. I've said many times before in sermons, that if you remember the old doo wop song by the Monotones, "Who wrote the Book of Love?" Well, of course we know, John did. John's Gospel is the Book of Love, for it tells us over and over about the depth of God's love for us, that God so loved the world God sent Jesus into our world that God's word might become flesh and dwell with us, and Jesus leaves us with the new commandment in John's Gospel, that we love one another as God loves us. The depth of this love, as we see in our Gospel lesson appointed today, the depth of that love is that God is always with us in this love, we are not abandoned, not left on our own, and as we hear today, we will live in the fullness of the Spirit of this love, and this Spirit will, "abide with you," and be present with you. Indeed, as Jesus tells us today, I will not leave you orphaned. It is the power of that love to surround us, that power of that love to bear us up, to be with us even in the times when we might feel most alone, that has been such an important lesson to us in the midst of this period when we are called to remain physically distant from each other. And as Cindy Cobb pointed out in our Bible Study earlier this week, this same sentiment is given even earlier voice in our Psalm that we read together, as Psalm of assurance, and which concludes, "Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me." It is this basic trust that, that God is with us and cares for us with a never failing love, that is so important to us in the midst of this difficult and crazy time. As we begin to move forward together, as we begin to make our lives out in the world, we do so in the faith that this love becomes our orientation to the world. This is our faith, an Easter faith that looks forward to living in the world on the basis of God's love. I have to admit, this sense came through to me even stronger as I reflected on these scriptural texts and listened to Governor Scott's press conference on Friday: Vermonters have done an incredible job taking care of each other; we now have the lowest rate of infection and transmission of the virus in the nation. Of all 50 states, Vermont now leads the way in keep our neighbors and ourselves healthy. All the hard work we have done is now showing results, and we should be very proud of this accomplishment. However, this is not the time for complacency, we cannot give up the hard lessons of love that we have learned. First of all, we have to keep it up, keep up the hard work of that love and solidarity to see this all the way through. There is not a vaccine nor a cure for the virus, and until there is we have to continue to practice this love in all our healthy practices of physical distancing, not infecting others by wearing masks and making sure we keep ourselves and our neighbors healthy, just as Dr. Levine and all our public

health officials have said over and over again. Their warnings and advice are really important now as we begin to live in a more open way in the next few weeks and months. But also, as I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks this morning, we also need to keep the lesson we are learning in this historic time to find the ways both to help our neighbors in need, those whose lives have been turned upside down by the economic chaos of these times, finding the ways to rebuild our society in a fashion that takes care of all. This crisis presents us with a great opportunity. For example, we found that as a state and a community, we could house all the homeless neighbors we have. This has been a real miracle. Four years ago, on April 26, 2016, we launched a campaign to end homelessness in Washington County by 2020. Believe it or not, this impossible dream, this quixotic campaign, has been successful at this point, in order to stop the spread of the virus and to protect some of our most vulnerable neighbors, all the homeless individuals and families in Washington County are now housed. Of course, this is only temporary during the emergency, but now that we have seen it is possible, how do we make this sustainable, how do we end homelessness for good in our community? This is where we will call even more deeply on the love of God, on God's providence to help us in our effort to put God's love into action, to find the most just and sustainable solutions to some of our seemingly most intractable social crises. On this Rogation Sunday, this time when we undertake asking God to grant us a bountiful harvest, to ask God's provision for our needs in the future, let us reflect on the lessons we are learning for care and compassion for others, for seeking the depth of God's love to enable us to take care of others and to show God's love in our lives. In the power of the resurrection, the power of God raising Jesus to new life, in this season we are called to bring that love to a deeper place in our lives, to make that love public by working to care for others in seeking justice for the least of these, for the essential workers and those in deep need in our community and throughout our nation and the world. Now is the time to remain strong in our resolve to live ever more faithfully in the love God shows us in the resurrected life of Christ and in the promise that God will be with us through the coming weeks and months. The times we face are difficult and I believe that the economic disruption will be equally challenging, but we have been given a deep faith to move forward together into these times with confidence that God will continue to bless us in our lives and our efforts to bring God's love ever closer in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. Thanks be to God for this promise of providence and grace in

our lives and thanks be to the Risen Christ for the Spirit of love to lead us into this truth. Amen.