

Pentecost 4 June 28, 2020

There is some bad news and that is that the coronavirus infections are growing at an alarming rate in many places throughout the country. I am glad to say that we are still doing a very good job here in Vermont keeping the infection rates among some of the lowest in the nation by continuing all the safe practices we have developed: physical distancing, wearing masks, keep small groups and not gathering indoors, and also, of course, washing our hands frequently. So we need to keep this up and hope that our sisters and brothers around the country will also work in all the right ways to bring down the infection rates in their areas. And now more than ever, we need to pray for the compassion and common sense that will help us all to get through this pandemic together and keep everyone safe and healthy.

Prayer: O wonderful God, continue to fill our hearts with the grace of your freeing Word that we may serve you, in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Sometimes our Christian faith has been too closely identified with our Christian doctrine. Faith, of course, is that basic trust in God, the trust that God is with us and caring for us and all creation, even in the midst of the troubles and tribulations that befall. Our faith is that orientation in our lives to open our hearts and souls to God in trust and thanksgiving. Over the past few weeks we have heard stories from the Hebrew scriptures that

illustrate some of these characteristics of faith for us. In the story we heard last week about Hagar's banishment, her unjust exile from Abraham's household and her abandonment into the wilderness where she and her child Ishmael face certain death, God sustains her and the child; God hears her cry of distress, and then God calls out to Hagar in the midst of her misery and torment, God calls out in a voice from heaven, "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the cries of the boy." And God sustains Hagar and Ishmael, protects them and guides them on their way. In a similar manner, the lesson from Genesis today, the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, often referred to as the 'sacrifice of Isaac,' is also a story of faith. This story, well known as it is, I think tends to be misunderstood more often than not, in our Christian teaching, because even in the title we have given it, 'the sacrifice of Isaac,' is incorrect. I do not see this story as a 'test of Abraham's faith,' and Isaac is not sacrificed so this title we've given the story is completely wrong. Rather, this is a story about God providing, God's amazing providence to 'make a way out of no way,' as Professor Delores Williams has put it. Abraham was also given that amazing gift, the call from God, "Fear not." And despite the ups and downs in his life, despite the travels and travails, Abraham pits his trust in God's providence, Abraham opens his heart and soul to God's goodness and moves forward in faith.

Our Biblical stories, of course, are stories of faith; these are stories

collected by our ancestors and handed down to us of the struggles our ancestors endured, the trials and tribulations they went through, but even more importantly, stories of their relationship to God, and just as significantly, God's relationship with God's people. As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, there can often be a confusion between our sense of faith and our Christian doctrines, the teachings of the Church about our faith. You can see, of course, how this confusion can easily arise: we often in our casual speech and understanding use the terms "faith" and "belief" as the same, as synonyms. Although there is a great deal of overlap in the meanings of the words "faith" and "belief," their meanings are not exactly the same, they are not identical. While belief does have the sense of consenting to an understanding and a position which we may not be able to "prove" in a scientific sense, faith seems to be much more basic, the basic orientation and outlook we have in life, that we hold on to deep in our souls. For example, we begin our creedal statements, either the Nicene Creed or the apostle's Creed we use during Morning Prayer, we say these together each Sunday, and as we will do after the conclusion of this sermon, we begin it with the words, "We believe." This is a statement of our faith, but it is also a *second order* reflection on our faith. It tells of content of our faith, what we can say about our lives and the world when seen through the eyes of our faith. And that is the distinction I would make between faith and belief. Faith is that

*primary orientation*, how we live in the world, faith in God opening up our souls and our hearts to God in our lives. That's why I think speaking of faith as seeing through the eyes of faith is a powerful metaphor for us as Christians. Our belief, while just as strongly rooted in our hearts also involves our minds, the intellects God has given us to see what the implications of faith will be for our lives and for the life of the world.

This is where some of the question of doctrine comes to play, what is our Christian teaching and what importance does it have in our lives? A few weeks ago, we celebrated Trinity Sunday together. It is the day when we specifically celebrate that our Christian revelation of God, the way we know God is as the three in one and the one in three persons. As I said in my sermon that day, traditionally our way of speaking of God as Trinity is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Also, as I mentioned in that sermon, I think that a better to conceive of the Trinity is as one being with another in a spirit of love and freedom, for that way we acknowledge the relationship that is at the very heart of God almighty, that the nature of God is to be related in a loving freedom and in a freeing love. I believe that it is important that we have our teaching in the Church, the doctrines that allow us to understand the significance of our faith. These doctrines, the reflection on the meaning of faith in our lives is very important, because it also shows us the places where our faith will lead us; it opens up the possibility of mission. It is a good thing that we are able to engage in

theological explorations about the nature of our faith; who God is for us and how God relates to creation, how God calls us to live in the light of God's love and how we are called to live faithfully as the people of God, and finally, what God leads us to through the amazing grace God shows in our lives. These reflections, while not our faith itself, are intimately and intricately related to our live of faith and an important part of our Christian witness and identity.

And Jesus, of course, that wise teacher who embodies the very love of God for us, Jesus calls us deeply into the life of faith, bidding us to see with the eyes of faith: bidding us today in the Gospel to follow his call into service and love: Jesus gives another word of re-assurance to his followers. As Jesus tells them, they will be welcome, welcome as one who comes in the name of the Lord, welcome as one who comes in the name of the divine, welcome as a prophet and welcome as a righteous one. Then at the end, Jesus gives one of his most extraordinary instructions: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." There are two aspects of this saying that I believe need a little further attention. First, this simple instruction is striking both in its simplicity and its directness. As Jesus puts it, this is simplicity itself: giving a glass of cold water to little ones in need. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated, but what is

important is a simple action that puts the Good News into action. The simple offer of a glass of cold water....taking that which is so mundane and everyday, but in this context it becomes an act of the divine, showing the kindness and mercy that bears the marks of God's gracious kingdom. This is the Good News in action, not an act for the rich or the powerful, but seeking out those whom Jesus calls "the little ones," the people who are the marginalized, the forgotten, the overlooked, for this specific act of kindness. A simple act, a simple, small gesture, but an action full of the grace of the divine. Indeed, here Jesus very powerfully shows the way his followers are to act in the world, simple acts of kindness and mercy for those unrecognized by the world.

The second aspect of this instruction Jesus gives his disciples that I find significant is the mutuality that he wants them to understand. In the welcome they will receive, there is an openness which Jesus stresses is the openness of the divine in their lives that opens their lives to their neighbors, that forming of a relationship between neighbors now based on God's love and no longer within the confines of our narrow human interests of greed and selfishness. Jesus points the way to a new orientation for the lives of the disciples, to live for others as God has given them new life.. This is Jesus' call to his followers, both those who heard his voice fill their ears and also those like us, like you and me, maybe

distant from Jesus over the passing of years, but his voice still comes to us clearly. And this call, a call we answer in faith, is not difficult, like I said, this is not rocket science, and turning to Jesus, it is indeed easy, just as easy as opening up your soul and heart to this embodiment of God's love for us.

In the midst of all the difficult crises we face together now in our world, in the midst of this global pandemic and the economic distress, in this time of racial reckoning in our nation, seeking to live now in a fashion to overcome the white supremacy which has kept black and brown lives at risk, these lessons from our Scriptures teach us that God's providence, God's claim on our lives and all God's world is the basis for our hope and our faith. Jesus calls us, Jesus calls you and me to open our souls to the never failing mercy, that God will make the way for us as we reach out in faith, trusting God to be present for us and to guide us in the way of love. As we began worship together this morning, we started with a prayer, a prayer that should be ever so special to us as people of faith: we prayed that God will grant us to be joined together in a spirit of unity by the teachings of Jesus that we might open our souls to all by God's amazing grace and mercy. And so, we now acknowledge in faith that God freely gives us what we need, that by God's providence we are graciously freed into following God, giving us what we need and opening up our hearts and

souls to God's awesome presence in our lives. Thanks are to God for this amazing grace. Amen.