

“Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled”

Time takes a toll on human memory. The exciting proclamation that “Christ is risen” fades as we move farther away from Easter Sunday. The beautiful flowers ... the dynamic hymns ... the joy ... all move into the background of our lives. Daily activities and weekend events crowd out promises made and commitments renewed. We are very busy people. Spring is here and along with it comes much yard work ... the kid’s school and special activities. Our devotion to God and our willingness to be faithful unconsciously take a back seat to our hectic lives. Kids count the days until school is out. Vacation plans are made. And when we get the time, we try and enjoy the gorgeous weather and the beauty of God’s creation.

All of this makes me wonder what it was like for those first apostles. As years quickly went by since Jesus died and then appeared to them, what was it that kept their energy level elevated in order for them to establish the first Christian Church? What motivated them despite the persecutions and deaths of many who dared to claim single allegiance to Jesus as Lord? These are important questions for us. Because, as we examine the structure of our own faith community and develop ways in which we may be a more effective church to individuals and to community, we need to know what motivated those first disciples to such a high level of loyalty and commitment. In fact, a more fundamental question is, what is it that grows and sustains faith in us as individuals, and in us as a church?

Allow me to begin to answer the question with a slight comparison. Up to the present, only eleven horses have won the coveted Triple Crown in thoroughbred racing ... that is only eleven horses have finished first in the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont Stakes. The first two horses to accomplish this extraordinary feat were Sir Barton in 1919 and Gallant Fox in 1930. The last two were Seattle Slew in 1977 and Affirmed in 1978. What is it that makes some horses winning thoroughbreds? Why is it that some horses have more speed, strength and stamina than other horses? Essentially, of course, these traits have to come from within the horse themselves, from their own inner capacity and from their inherited gene structure. Still it seems that they also need help from outside. To become champions, they need the help of expert trainers and skillful jockeys to develop and activate their inner powers.

The same is true with us when it comes to developing an active faith. Born as humans, we have within us capacities to love, learn, choose, and work and so on. But we need outside help. We need advocates, counselors, and comforters. These come to us in the way of parents, teachers, pastors, and friends. The godly help of those who have surrounded our lives from birth until now emulate God’s Holy Spirit coming to us and empowering us. Just as a Triple Crown thoroughbred needs more than raw energy to be a champion, so human beings need a helper to complement human energy with divine energy. The same is true with human faith. We need a helper to cultivate and sustain our faith so as to prevent us from giving in to that which would destroy our faith ... so as to stop us from surrendering to those doubts and fears that draw us away from God. I think the best example of a helper is that of “how” human beings love.

In our Gospel lesson for today, John writes that there is only one test of love and that is obedience. It was by his obedience that Jesus showed his love for God. And it is by our obedience that we must show our love for Jesus Christ. One commentator writes: *John never allowed love to dissolve into a sentiment or emotion. John defines love as a moral expression and is revealed in obedience. You and I know all too well how there are those who proclaim their love in words but who, at the same time, bring pain and heartbreak to those whom they claim to love. There are children and young people who say that they love their parents, and who yet cause them grief and anxiety. There are husbands who say they love their wives and wives who say they love their husbands, and who yet, by their selfishness, their inconsiderateness, and their irritability bring pain to each other. To Jesus, real love is not an easy thing. Real love is shown only in true obedience.*

Knowing this, Jesus did not leave his disciples alone ... nor does Jesus leave us to struggle alone in our Christian life ... to struggle alone with how to maintain our belief in the face of great adversity. John writes that Jesus sends us a “helper”. The Greek word that John uses is *parakletos*, which is really untranslatable. But various biblical translations render it to mean: Comforter, Helper, or Advocate. Literally, *parakletos* means “someone who is called in,” or “one called to the side of.” In Jesus’ time, a *parakletos* would have been a person called in to a court of law to give witness in someone’s favor; or would have been an advocate called in to plead the cause of someone under a charge which would issue a serious penalty; or would have been an expert called in to give advice in some difficult situation; or would have been a motivational speaker called in to put new courage into the minds and hearts a company of dispirited soldiers. Always, though, a *parakletos* was someone called in to help in time of trouble and need.

Often we talk about being able to cope with things. The coping mechanism is precisely the function of the *parakletos*, is the exact purpose and work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes away our inadequacies and enables us to cope with life. The Holy Spirit substitutes defeated living with victorious living. What Jesus is saying in today's gospel lesson is: *As a follower of mine, I am setting you a hard task, and I am sending you out on a very difficult assignment. However, I am going to send you someone. I am calling in a Helper who will guide you as to what to do and enable you to do it. I am calling in an Advocate, someone to speak on your behalf when you cannot speak; someone to move your feet, when you cannot move; someone to open your eyes and unstop your ears, when you refuse see or hear. That someone is the Parakletos ... the Spirit of Truth!*

Also, Jesus went on to say that the world cannot recognize the Spirit, because the world lives as if there is no God. The point Jesus is making is that we can see only what we are fitted to see. An astronomer will see far more in the sky than an ordinary person. A botanist will see more in vegetation than an ordinary person. Someone who knows art will see far more in a picture than someone who is quite ignorant of art. Someone who understands a little about music will get far more out of a symphony than someone who understands nothing. Someone who understands the construction industry will usually understand far more than the people buying or building a house.

Always what we see and experience depends on what we bring to the sight and the experience. A person who has eliminated God from their understanding and never listens for God, can not receive God's *parakletos*, God's Spirit, God's Helper, God's Comforter. We cannot receive the Holy Spirit unless we wait in expectation and in prayer for the Spirit to come to us ... nor can we recognize the work of the Spirit unless we take the time to patiently discern God's work in this world and in our life.

This is how it works. In our personal lives we have troubles with our work, and troubles with our marriages, troubles with our children and troubles with our parents, trouble with our in-laws, troubles with our car and troubles with our health. We even have imaginary troubles to add to our real ones. We imagine failure and loss, and we become afraid. We imagine criticism and rejection and we become paralyzed. True these things seldom happen all at once. But still they upset our peace of mind.

Jesus had troubles, too. Jesus had troubles with the Pharisees who twisted His words, troubles with his disciples who understood so little, troubles with Judas who betrayed him, trouble with Peter who denied him, and troubles with the fear of his impending death. Yet, in spite of all these troubles, Jesus was able to say with calmness and confidence: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me." The faith that Jesus speaks of is a belief we are to have in him, who never really left his disciples, and who never leaves us alone. The faith Jesus speaks of is a belief that he did not and will not leave his disciples "comfortless," because of the existence of the *Parakletos*, because of the existence of an Advocate, or a Counselor, or a Comforter that is alongside us, helping us, reassuring us, and empowering us.

Therefore, that which keeps our faith energy up, that which motivates us, that which sustains us in our beliefs is that which God gives to all who believe ... the gift of the Spirit engendered within that prods us along our faith journey. I remember an old high school cheer: "We've got spirit, yes we do. We've got spirit, how about you?" On the last line, fans and cheerleaders would point across the gym to the opposing fans as they screamed in full-throat, "How about you?" School spirit or church spirit or any other kind of *institutional enthusiasm* is **not** the Spirit Jesus promises to his disciples.

The Spirit Jesus promises is quieter, yet more powerful and sustaining than the rah-rah exuberance of energy or the emotional ecstasy of a charismatic. Jesus promises something more substantial and steadier than that. One Bible commentator defines the spirit that Jesus promises to give us as a "settled permanent penetrative influence, more of a possession by a power greater than self, more heavenly than earthly." The Spirit is what sets believers apart from the non-believers, and is what makes a difference in the quality of living and attitude. The Spirit implies no sense of superiority but is rather a sense that the believer is endowed with divine guidance and power, and is open to receive God's gift of life and energy. To have the Spirit is to possess a frame of mind, an attitude, an outlook, and to be concerned or involved socially ... to be in the world but not of the world. God's Spirit empowered and energized those first disciples to preach and to witness boldly to where they could say in effect: "We got the Spirit, how about you?"

This church is 131 years old. Those who came before us are still with us ... their spirit is engendered within the ongoing nature of the ministry and mission of this church. We have inherited their spirit, as well as the spirit of those first apostles. We are not alone, as they were not alone. Jesus was forever with them, as Jesus is with us. For Jesus has promised not to leave us to ourselves. He remains present with us, continuing to guide us, to love us, and to speak to us through the Comforter ... the Advocate ... the Holy Spirit. In our struggles to be faithful Christians ... in our struggles to be a faithful church ... we are not alone. Jesus is with us! In my lifetime, I have come to truly believe this and this belief is what has sustained me.