

Seventh Easter

May 28, 2017

St. Anne's Episcopal Church

Do Not Leave Us Comfortless

Have you ever been in that situation, where someone pulled out of town and left you in charge—with no idea what that was going to mean? It happened to me in high school. My parents went on an almost weeklong business trip from Atlanta to New Orleans and left me in charge of the household, which included my younger brother, who was five years younger than me. We had groceries, and I could drive the spare car if needed, so I think we both thought this was going to be a piece of cake. Of course, this was pre-fast food, pre-cable, pre-video games, pre-computers, and pre-cell phone times, but I assumed we would each be entertained well enough by our friends coming over and getting by like bandits until the return of parental discipline. And then it started to snow, and then the snow turned to ice, and then it was impossible to even walk on our own driveway, and then it got *really* cold, in the teens, and then the power went off, for about 3 days, and took the phone with it.

What saved us, if you can call it that, was a gas stove and oven which we used like a small fireplace in our small kitchen; the furnace was controlled by thermostats which needed electricity. I set all the faucets to drip, and closed-up the kitchen to keep it heated while the windows in the house frosted over as the temperature in the rest of the house hovered at freezing. So much for being free from parents. We were cooped up in that 8 by 10 kitchen, sharing a table big enough for about 2 plates, for 3 days, leaving it only to run and jump in our beds at night—beds that were piled high with blankets that did not help the sensation of sliding between two sheets of ice until body heat warmed up a space the size of a sleeping bag. And I am here to say that surviving for 3 days with a grumpy adolescent male was not my idea of a good time. Being left in charge was *not* what it had been cracked up to be. And of course, by the time my parents got home, the ice was melted, the sun was out, the power was back on, and no description of our circumstances sufficed for them to comprehend our suffering.

I was reminded of this story this past Thursday as we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension in Little St. Anne's—described in the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts as the day that the disciples of Jesus witnessed him being lifted up into the heavens, body and soul, to be reunited in all fullness with the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I was identifying with the disciples, who must have had trouble watching Jesus leave them, for as hard as he had tried to prepare the disciples, no amount of prayer or warnings to them seemed to be enough to help them understand what was going to happen—that Jesus was leaving their human company for good, and leaving them in charge.

The poor disciples had still been waiting for something *big* to happen—even after the crucifixion and the resurrection, they were still waiting for Jesus to restore the kingdom of Israel—if not as they had known it personally, then as they had been taught to imagine it in all its glory. If all their travels and trials with Jesus the Son of God had not been leading up to this, then what was the point? Jesus *did* use the world *kingdom*—a lot—so what else were they supposed to think?

What Jesus really wanted them to believe, to understand, and to do—who Jesus wanted them to be—is found in the words of John's gospel today. This prayer from the Son to his Father about his hopes and dreams for the disciples, was spoken on the night Jesus was arrested in the garden—the night before he died on the cross. The hour had come for Jesus to make the sacrifice for which he had been preparing for the past three years, and he was summarizing his work on earth, and making his case that his disciples were ready to graduate from being followers to being leaders. Jesus argued that their faith was solid, that they had learned everything they needed to know, and that he could not have done what he had come into the world to do without them. Jesus trusted the disciples because they had kept his word, and Jesus trusted in God the Father to hear this, and to care for them, to protect them, to empower them, and to make them *one*—just as Jesus and the Father were One.

Even though the disciples did not yet know what was ahead of them—how the Holy Spirit would infuse them with power and conviction and fire and the willingness to

sacrifice themselves as Jesus had—Jesus believed that they could do what they were *called* to do—to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and enfolded everyone into the beloved community, sharing their faith in the One God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that once they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples would understand that they *could* build the kingdom of God—not in the familiar way of the world with the power of violence and oppression that prospers the rich at the expense of the poor, but in the way of the loving God with the power that is carried in love, forgiveness and grace. The kingdom that is the dream of God is identified by abundance and generosity in the things that matter—kindness, support, prayer, self-sacrifice, healing, restoration, redemption.

Kingdom work for disciples of Jesus has always involved practicing all these things, and speaking of these things in the world without shame, without cynicism, and without the need to demonize others to make ourselves feel safe. From the letter of Peter, we heard that the only adversary we should recognize is the devil, who prowls around us like a roaring lion, looking to devour us, whispering that the ways of the world—with its tribalism, its bitter rancor, and its seductive message of “me first”—are the only ways we *need* to know to avoid suffering. The devil wants us to believe that we deserve to survive even as others are perishing. Peter tells us instead to keep alert, to discipline ourselves, to humble ourselves, and to prepare for suffering.

What are we to make of this powerful message? Are not we as beloved as the disciples? Have we not been promised the kingdom of God with our salvation, already bought and paid by the blood of our Savior? Surely if we make our prayers and gather for worship and look out for our friends, we are pleasing God and building the kingdom? What more could God be calling us to think, to do, to be?

It is not hard to see that something is missing in our world lately—that something is wrong with the way we go about our business. We are constantly reading and listening to our writers and our poets and some of our leaders telling us that we have lost our bearings and scarcely know where to go to find safe shelter, safe harbor, much less—civility. We confuse being right with being secure, and the farther we wander from

love, forgiveness and grace, the less important gathering as God's people seems to be. Fewer people in our Western society say that they even believe in God, and of those who do, fewer and fewer seek to belong to a community of believers. Some have been wounded by church, and some have never been in one. This is true for Christianity in particular, and no one has yet figured out what to do about it. Mega churches attract thousands, and yet the people who make up those thousands are always coming and going. Many say they are "spiritual" without being religious. Our world is getting nastier and meaner and more isolating, and fewer and fewer people look to the love, forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ as a balm for their pain. But what can *we* do?

God has called us into this community of love, forgiveness and grace—a safe harbor where we can worship and seek healing and remember that we were created to be the beloved children of God. I have heard more than a few say that finding this church has saved their lives. But what of the world out there? What about everyone else? How do we live into God's call to discipleship, to share our faith with love and grace, as if it were something important in our lives—as if it matters? How do we show our gratitude for the generosity our loving God has shown towards us? Tithing—yes. Supporting the ministry of our church with time and resources—yes. But building God's kingdom calls for even more than that—it is work that belongs to every believer, to every disciple, and cannot be left to the hired hands of the clergy—if that old model were effective then church attendance would not be declining across the board and we would not be having this conversation. The world *needs* the love of Jesus more than ever. The world needs what we have, but we are not good at offering it to the world. We are not comfortable with evangelism. We fear rejection, and don't want to embarrass ourselves by being labeled judgmental or self-righteous, or God forbid, hypocritical.

We need to learn again how to share the Good News, just as the disciples had to learn 2000 years ago. But we are not left comfortless. During this Summer, our Adult Sunday School will offer a fun and engaging program called *Invite, Welcome, Connect*, to teach us simple, concrete and practical ways of inviting others into our life of faith while staying true to who we are. And on June 25, a Sunday afternoon, some of the top Evangelists in the Episcopal Church are coming to St. Anne's right here in Tifton, to lead

a workshop for the Diocese of Georgia on evangelism. These are opportunities to learn how to share our thoughts, our hopes and dreams, and to overcome our anxieties about doing God's kingdom work in our own community. They offer *new* ways of thinking and of doing an old thing—sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. My prayer is that we will be alert to our call to be the disciples Jesus knows us to be, as we wait for the Advocate of Pentecost, who will not leave us comfortless in our task. AMEN