

Easter 5A 2014

Our Gospel passage is one of the most beautiful and comforting passages in the Bible, and it is no surprise that it is the most popular reading choice for funerals. Even those who claim little interest in religion find themselves drawn to these familiar words, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places..."** (John 14:1-14).

Following four weeks of Resurrection stories, this Fifth Sunday of Easter takes us back to a moment before Jesus' arrest and death as he prepares his disciples for his departure and absence. This flashback serves as a powerful way to understand the heart of Christ. Indeed, he further says, " I go to prepare a place for you..."

We all share the desire to find our way home, whether it's at the end of a long day or at the end of a long journey, a long time of wandering, of alienation, of homesickness and pain. Home is normally a safe place. Its where we are known and loved unconditionally.

Many people speak of finding a church "home" when they find a congregation that welcomes them and feels like a place in which they can grow their faith. Here at Trinity we care about one another with respect, concern and a willingness to support each other in life's journey. For

some, the church may be the one place in their life that they experience God's protective love in a hostile and dangerous world. A church home means finding a safe haven, a refuge, fortress , and a rock.

Years ago when restoring Holy Trinity Church in Belvidere, we took three stained glass windows from the front of the tower where they had been moved in the 1920's. They originally were over the altar, much like we see here. The center one had a picture of a human figure clinging to a rock shaped like a cross while a torrent of waters swirled all around. It alluded to Biblical images of God in the psalms and scriptures. It brought to mind the hymn *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hid myself in Thee*. Our church home is the place where we can be challenged to grow in faith and love by serving in the many ways needed to build the Church and change the world. We ourselves become part of the "structure," of our spiritual home as the reading from First Peter speaks of. His audience was a group of dispossessed people, people who had no unifying dignity and and identity.

But now they were being transformed as are we from no people into "God's people". Have you ever felt like a "nobody and then became a "somebody"? Have you ever felt outside and alone, and then became part of something greater than yourself? O how glorious when it happens that through our baptism we are adopted into God's household.

We became part of a “chosen race” a holy and royal people. We have come into the “marvelous light” of God.

In the Act of the Apostles reading today we are introduced to the first deacon, Stephen. Called to merely facilitate the charitable ministry of the Church by very busy Apostles, God had much bigger plans for him. The order of deacons came first.

Both John Dolan and I are ordained deacons. To that office, I was called to be ordained a priest as well. Yet most of the time we function doing the same work. The pastoral care of God’s people, teaching, preaching, visiting the sick, administering the finances and business of the parish. Only in the sacramental duties, primarily the Eucharist, do I have the privileges of my priestly office.

We both have experienced God amazing grace and power poured into us. Deacons are not relegated to the mundane chores of assistants alone. In heart and mind and spirit we are caught up into the Mission and Ministry founded on God longing, loving desire for all people, all creation to come home.

St. Stephen ignited a persecution in Jerusalem which pushed the disciples beyond the boundaries of religion, nationality and race to proclaim and to witness the saving acts of Jesus.

Stephen like Jesus, saw the heavens open, and in the midst of dying forgave his murderers. Only profound faith in Christ Jesus, being possessed by the Holy Spirit can make us look upon our enemies through the loving eyes of God. He was going “home” where Jesus would be more fully known and he would see God face to face.

Another dimension of the Church as home comes from the reading of First Peter. It reminds us that the House of God is built with living stones. Jesus is the precious cornerstone of this spiritual and temporal home. God is calling us to live in it upon earth and in heaven. You and I, are the living building blocks ever expanding this spiritual home.

Picture this. Numerous stone quarries are to be found all across the county. It is likely that the very stones which constructed this building came from one of them nearby. They were dug out of the earth from sediment laid down long ago in prehistoric seas turning in time into stone. Each one was cut from the bedrock and hand finished into manageable blocks. They were then brought to this site by horse drawn wagons. Dredging buckets pulled by horses first dug the hole and trenches which were filled with foundation stone. Then masons laid the rows upon each other for the walls. Many hands were employed to build this place which has served so well for 140 years.

But it was not just the hands of these laborers which build this church, but the members of the church, the vestries and priests who raised the funds and guided the construction. They were also building a congregation, a body of living stones, which reflected the outward stone structure. So which is really the Church? The stone building or the people who have and still do occupy and use it? It is both.

This building is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual people of God. It is the house of God as a structure on Lincoln and Benton, and also the home of us Christians in the Anglican/Episcopal tradition. It still serves as a safe and welcoming place, a home.

Today, people of all kinds find their way - hungry, seeking - to our church and when they arrive, they hear us tell a story, whether or not we're aware that we're telling one. We tell the biblical story in our preaching, worship, and study, but also our story written in bricks and mortar. The story of Trinity, its ups and down, and our own story too convey the Good News of God in Christ.

During this interim period we are being challenged to imagine the next chapter in the life of Trinity Church. Even more, to imagine what's possible beyond our usual categories of thought about what it means to be faithful, to be open to seeing and feeling God at work here and in the world around us. The Question is: are we committed to

being open to the transformation of our lives and of the world? Do we believe that God is bringing us home?

We share the good news of a God at work in the world God loves. God does this by working in each and everyone of us individually and corporately. God's voice is still and small and often overlooked amid the materialism, success, growth and prosperity of the world.

We need to consider our identity in a world that often blurs into the life of the church. True, culture can have valuable gifts and support for our life in the church. Yet there comes a point where we stand apart and declare ourselves different. When you come here, is the feeling of being home shared with others? Can visitors feel the difference? Do you make a space at your table for them?

In his commentary, *The Cultural World of Jesus Year A* John Pilch says that Jesus embodies and “demonstrates absolute, total and universal love” for all . His “life, teaching, and behavior do indeed present people within authentic vision of human existence. ‘He is a model of the way human life ought to be lived’ in order to “encounter God, who is Love.”

I truly believe, Trinity church folks are well along the way. This is a place that welcomes all people to come home to God. Amen.

