

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Sixth Sunday of Easter/May 9, 2010
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"Come stay at my home," Lydia urges Paul. She had listened eagerly to hear of God's grace that gives new life, a freer life, a more hopeful life, a life full of relationship. She wanted that life for herself and her family and so they were baptized. We want to hold on to the bearer of such good news. Lydia does not want Paul to go but to stay at her home. On the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and another disciple, unaware that it was the risen Christ who opened the scriptures to them, invited him to stay with them. This unknown bearer of good news told of the Father's love that took Jesus from suffering to glory, and themselves from loss to life. They did not want this stranger to leave but urged him strongly to stay, and the risen Christ was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. The pattern is that when we hear of life that is hopeful and full of relationship, we want to make room for the Giver of that life.

Looked at from the other side, Jesus said, the Father and I will make our home with those who love me and keep my word. Love of Jesus is love in action. To keep Jesus' word is to follow Jesus' command to love God and your neighbor as yourself. At baptism we promise to do this, not on our own, not of our own power, but with God's help. "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" "I will," we say, "with God's help." We need the presence of God to lift us beyond our limitations. Have you ever thought to yourself, "I didn't know I was capable of giving such help," or "how did I ever think of saying such a right and comforting word?" God makes a home in us as holy energy and creative practice. We can do more than we think we are capable of.

Now, if both of these things are true, that we want the risen Christ to make a home with us, and that as well God and Jesus want to make a home with us, then what gets in the way? Why isn't everyone just bursting with the Spirit? Why isn't the world overflowing with joy rather than languishing in apprehension? Why aren't

people more positively oriented in the universe rather than absent of sources for hope?

I think it has to do with what voices we listen to. Remember how the Lord opened Lydia's heart to listen eagerly? Her worth did not come from the fact that she dealt in purple cloth making her relatively wealthy. Hers was not a performance based identity. It wasn't her successful executive abilities that caused her to listen. Instead it was the Lord who opened her heart. Lydia's worth is not based upon performance, but upon God's love for her that is free, unearned and absolutely trustworthy.

There are other voices that we hear. George Herbert begins a poem entitled "Love" by saying, "love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back." The voice was an accusing one. Think of all the things you should have done, the words you should have said. Guilt pushes God away; and still Love draws close. The next voice is unworthiness. A centurion said to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" (Matt. 8:8). The prodigal son squandered his inheritance and confessed to his father, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Unworthiness pushes God away and still Love draws close.

We are deceived by voices of guilt and unworthiness that close us off from God. They are not true. I was asked to see a woman several years ago. I went to her home and it became clear to me that at least unconsciously she was asking for help to grow spiritually. She was afraid to take that step, however, because (as she said) it would make her appear hypocritical. This stopped her from addressing her deepest need.

At baptism we renounce these voices. Satan is called "the deceiver of the whole world" in the Book of Revelation (12: 9). Evil deceives us by claiming that the stain of guilt keeps God away. We are deceived by the fear that we are too unworthy for God. The fear of hypocrisy deceives us so that we hold ourselves back from God. Three times at baptism we renounce these destructive voices. And then we turn to Jesus who is the Truth. Poet W. H. Auden wrote: "He is the Truth./ Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;/ You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years."

The great city, says the Book of Revelation is "the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven" (21: 10). Here God makes a home with us and we with God. We invite the risen Christ to stay with us and to open our hearts so that the God of

Love may make a home with us. All may enter this great city “who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (21: 27). I have spoken with those close to death who wonder whether they are written in that book, and this can be a source of anxiety. The answer according to the Bible is “yes.” Love is elastic. It stretches to include everything of value – and Jesus said time and again that each one of us is of value to his Father in heaven.

Entrance into this heavenly city is by the grace of God. We don’t earn our way in by performance or by our own worthiness. In fact, the tree of *life* is in that place with leaves for the healing of the nations. There is healing from deception, healing from guilt, healing from hypocrisy if that is a concern. The promise is that God will remove every uncleanness from us all. That’s the truth.

We seek Jesus right where we are, in an apprehensive world that is sometimes absent sources of hope. We find Jesus in the stranger who opens the scriptures to us and we ask him to stay. Jesus finds *us* in a love that bids us welcome. The Father and risen Christ desire to make their home with us. And when we listen to the voice that is true, we will come to that great city that has expected our return for years.

Amen.