

Sermon for 7 May 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimroe

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Scriptures: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 (*Insert, alternate leader & people*); 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 14:1-14

“Turning”

When we say these Sundays immediately following Easter are training us in celebration, we don't mean they're all smooth and rosy.

I wrote this sermon in my head all week, and here's what I finally started putting down @ 11 last night.

It's just too big. I can't say it accurately.

Practicing celebrating – which is what we do in these Sundays after Easter --- isn't always pretty or upbeat.

Stephen's death is a perfect example. He's so good he infuriates people. First he's so modest and reliable he gets chosen to wait tables so Peter and the other disciples can preach. Then a group of temple-worshippers starts telling lies about him in their envy --- because remember, Christianity was still unorganized as separate from Judaism, and Stephen sided with the folks who followed the prophets that opposed King Solomon's building a temple @ all, offering sacrifices instead of just practicing love and justice. Stephen got so excited he preached against his opponents and, just like Jesus, insulted folks and ended up, just like Jesus, getting killed for his clear-cut putting down of them....

Haven't we seen that?

Part of being courageous means calling people out for things ...

...and Luke puts it right into the story of Christianity's development. You get so enthusiastic you build a church, and that angers people who think you ought to be just helping poor people. I remember when I was associate pastor @ Mount Vernon Place Church, downtown by the Washington Monument, they told about one old fellow who said now that they had this monumental building with a magnificent organ, were they going to get a machine to pray for them?

...and by the way, here we are letting that magnificent building go to waste, whereas I think we should be turning it into a house of prayer for all peoples ... just like Prince/King Charles now says he's not just a leader for the Church of England, but that religion is a vital force for good for all peoples, and whereas in his mother Elizabeth II's day 86% of Britain were Christian, now only 36% are, and so he supports all the great faiths as an essential element in holy living and valuable togetherness...

...so should the Baltimore-Washington Conference be promoting the turning of that historic landmark into a house of prayer for all peoples, showing the whole metropolis how to use faith to bring equality and peace – and get going on the real things, like our young people want us to...

...And this is Easter-talk ---argumentative, hopeful, coming out of our depression and anger into fresh light and life --- which is what we say at the graveside, “This is not the end,” or --- as Churchill said after the Battle of Britain, “ This is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning...”

This is what the Resurrection was and is saying, not just in writing ... What, after all, is the Bible but an attempt at describing new insight, and the scraps of fresh starts at being human beings? Jesus isn't saying he's tops, but that he's onto what's real like anybody making sense is, so listen and agree and come on, a new stage in reality is appearing. “ Follow me...”

We don't worship Scripture, but the God of scripture... And when we bury our life, our love, and stand, weeping, at the graveside, we're only letting go of the first page of loving. Far more is up ahead... God bless it all....

But it is a TURNING, to talk and live this way; and it's always turbulent, and we're forever fighting into manhood and womanhood ... and forever turning something beautiful into competition and abuse – and it isn't yours or mine to control, but to cooperate with, and to allow, and then wait for new insight; and, more than anything else, like we said yesterday at the pre-Conference briefing with the Bishop, “It's all about love”...

TURNING from ourselves into fellowship, and helpfulness, and facing how much less than cooperative we've been with one another and with nature, paving over the earth and packaging ourselves inside machines while much of humanity starves and dies 'way too early ... Learn to do it better and more generously. Be our brother's keeper --- that's where the real fun is: *celebrating* life, instead of just holding onto my part of it...

Turning to the Source and center, and redeeming the quality, the character, of reality, which WE see through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, whom we acknowledge as Christ, God-bearer --- our Lord and our fellow human ... the example and center of everything.

Practice that. Practice turning from old ways into that way, these Sundays of Easter.

Amen.