

Sunday, May 10, 2020

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Announcements

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Eighth Sunday of Quarantine, as we begin to pay more attention to the color of the quarantine level than the color of the church season. Hopefully, we'll soon have a plan as to when and under what conditions we will be able to gather again here in the church building.

Meanwhile remember, "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is its people." Most importantly, we are God's people, wherever we may be, and ultimately our trust, hope, and faith are in God to carry the church through whatever comes along, good or bad.

Today is also Mothers' Day, a day when the church is usually full. We extend a prayer for God's blessing on all mothers and all who care for others in any way.

Ironically, Jesus refers to God as Father 10 times in this morning's Gospel reading, but as the perfect loving parent, we might think of God as both Father and Mother in the loving relationship we share.

As always, the church office is open Monday thru Thursday to handle any special needs you may have and to take care of mail, offerings, and any other regular business still happening. The office number is 717-652-6700, my cell number is available there in case of emergencies. You can also email the church office at stmarksharrisburg@gmail.com, check out our website, stmarksharrisburg.org, and follow us on Facebook and YouTube.

Introduction

As we continue to celebrate the fifty days of Easter, today's gospel includes Jesus' promise that he goes to prepare a place for his followers in his Father's house. Our baptism commissions us to share Jesus' mission in the world. As First Peter reminds us, we are a holy people, called to proclaim the one who called us out of darkness into light. In words and deeds we bear witness to the risen Christ—our way, our truth, our life.

Thanksgiving for Baptism

All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked at baptism, as the presiding minister begins.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism,
we are raised with him to new life.

Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.

Water may be poured into the font as the presiding minister gives thanks.

We give you thanks, O God,
for in the beginning you created us in your image
and planted us in a well-watered garden.

In the desert you promised pools of water for the parched,
and you gave us water from the rock.

When we did not know the way,
you sent the Good Shepherd to lead us to still waters.

At the cross, you watered us from Jesus' wounded side,
and on this day, you shower us again with the water of life.

We praise you for your salvation through water,

for the water in this font,
and for all water everywhere.
Bathe us in your forgiveness, grace, and love.
Satisfy the thirsty, and give us the life only you can give.
To you be given honor and praise
through Jesus Christ our Lord
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Give us grace to love one another, to follow in the way of his commandments, and to share his risen life with all the world, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Acts 7:55-60

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to serve tables so that the apostles could be free to serve the word (Acts 6:1-6). Stephen does more than distribute food, however. For his preaching of God's word, he becomes the first martyr of the faith.

⁵⁵Filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the

witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Psalm: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Into your hands, O LORD, I commend my spirit. (Ps. 31:5)

¹In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be | put to shame;
deliver me | in your righteousness.

²**Incline your | ear to me;**
make haste to de- | liver me.

³Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag | and my
stronghold;

for the sake of your name, lead | me and guide me.

⁴**Take me out of the net that they have secretly | set for me,**
for you are my tow- | er of strength. R

⁵Into your hands I com- | mend my spirit,
for you have redeemed me, O LORD, | God of truth.

¹⁵**My times are | in your hand;**
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who |
persecute me.

¹⁶Let your face shine up- | on your servant;
save me in your | steadfast love.” **R**

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Christ is the cornerstone of God's saving work and the foundation of our lives. We are God's chosen, holy people who continuously celebrate and declare the mercy of God we experience through Jesus Christ.

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”

⁸and

“A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: John 14:1-14

On the night that he is to be arrested, Jesus shares final words with his disciples. As the one through whom God is known, he promises to go before them and act on their behalf.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

Children’s Sermon

Sermon

In the summer of 1996, Marian and I were making plans to move, along with our two children ages 15 and 11, from Greensburg in Western PA to Gettysburg, almost 200 miles away. We would be selling the only home our children ever knew, and the only real house Marian and I had ever owned, along with the bank

that held the mortgage of course. We had no friends or family anywhere close to Gettysburg and both kids would be starting new schools surrounded by new people.

On our way home from our family vacation in Myrtle beach that summer, we decided to stop by Gettysburg Seminary to see where we'd be living once we made the move. That decision almost made us change our minds about the whole thing!

Because of changing demographics at the seminary, they had begun converting some one-bedroom apartments to three-bedroom apartments to accommodate families like ours. This basically meant knocking a hole in an adjoining wall and putting in a doorway, then partitioning off the living room in one apartment to make it a bedroom. One benefit of this conversion was that we would have two bathrooms and two kitchens, though only one kitchen had appliances. The extra kitchen became my makeshift office where I could do my classwork, etc.

What almost put the kibosh on our plans, though, was that the renovation was only about half finished when we stopped. That, along with fact that the apartment had been flooded by torrential rains earlier in the summer, meant that the apartment did not exactly present itself as a desirable place to live, to say the least. When Marian sat on the bare concrete floor and began to cry, I wondered if we had somehow misinterpreted God's call to ministry. And if we hadn't misinterpreted the call, was this some kind of test to see if we could handle the ups and downs that lay ahead?

What we had to keep in mind was that the seminary staff was still *preparing a place for us* to live as *God* was preparing a place for us in which to serve the

church, and at the same time preparing *us* to serve in whatever way and whatever place God would lead us to serve.

Well, obviously, we didn't give up on seminary and, long story short, the place God was preparing for us was right here at St. Mark's, where we have had a relationship since the fall 1996, the first year our new life. It hasn't always been an easy journey through that new life, but, at least since my ordination 20 years ago, we have never felt that we did the wrong thing.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for us, a place in one of the many dwelling places in his Father's house. This is a passage often read at funerals, as we commend a loved one to that dwelling place that Jesus has prepared. But it is important to remember, like our experience in being prepared for ministry, that Jesus is preparing a place for us, and us for a place, everyday of our lives, not just for when we die. We may not always know where that place will be or what it will be like, but with patience and faith, we can be sure that God has good things in store for us. There may be days when we sit on the bare concrete floor and cry, there may be times when we wonder if we are hearing God's call rightly, but there will also be days when we realize that following Jesus as he leads us to the place he has prepared, or perhaps is still preparing for us, is the best thing we could ever have done.

When I think of preparing a place on this Mothers' Day, I can't help but make a connection with the mother birds I see busy building nests outside our sunporch windows. Those mother birds are preparing a place for their soon to be born chicks to safely hatch, where they will be fed and nurtured until they are strong enough to face the world on their own.

While it isn't always true, the role of a mother is normally to prepare for the arrival of a newborn, to prepare a place where the child will grow and be nurtured till it can face the world on its own. And, in the case of human mothers, to have a place prepared to which the child might return if the world is just too much to handle on their own. Fathers are important too, of course, but I believe there is a special bond between a mother and the child that she carries in her womb for nine months before it is born.

Unfortunately, human mothers and fathers are not perfect. That's why it is so important that we pay attention to Jesus' assurance that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, and, while he doesn't explicitly say it here, when he prays in the garden before his arrest, Jesus prays that we will be one with him just as he is one with the Father. So, in God, we have the perfect parent, the one who prepares us for a perfect relationship as both Mother and Father, along with Jesus the Son, our brother, with whom we are one.

History and tradition make it hard for us to think of God as mother, but the image of Heavenly Father is about relationship, not gender. In our hymnal we have a hymn, number 735, Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth. It speaks of the Triune God as the Mother of us all, giving us birth, feeding us, and nurturing us. While history shows us that Jesus was a man, no one has ever seen God. God is all things; all things good, all things divine, all things loving, and all things full of grace and forgiveness.

Jesus opens the door for us to enter that place of God's goodness and love. As we follow Jesus to those places he prepares for us in this life, we prepare to pass

through that open door to the place where God awaits us, to live forever in the perfect loving relationship of parent and child. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Build us up, mothering God, as living stones united in your spiritual house. Continually strengthen your church as it is sent forth to proclaim your love. We pray especially for new congregations and those in redevelopment and those struggling during this time of closure. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Humble us, creator God, as part of your creation. Fill us with respect and awe for the world you have made, including volcanoes, ocean currents, tropical rainstorms, glaciers, and other forces that both destroy and create. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Align our ways to your love, O God. We pray for countries, leaders, and other organizations as they prepare places for those seeking refuge and safety (*aid organizations may be named*). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of healing and rest, help those whose hearts are heavy and weighed down by many troubles. Comfort their suffering, ease their distress, and carry their

burdens (*especially Betty Briner and those we lift up to you now*). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Nurturing God, we pray for those who tend and teach young children, for the safe pregnancies of expectant parents, and for families who struggle with infertility and miscarriage. We give thanks for all who have shown mothering care, and we remember all for whom this day is difficult. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Generous God, you call into your brilliant light all who have died. Give us faith to take hold of the promise of your eternal life. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

Lord's Prayer

Amen.

Offering Prayer

Merciful God,

our ordinary gifts seem small for a celebration of your love for us,

but you make of them an abundance,

just as you do with our lives.

Feed us for service in your name,

in the strength of the risen Christ.

Amen.

Prayer after Communion

Life-giving God,

you have fed us with your word, and our hearts burn within us.

Now send us forth to share the gifts of Easter with all in need;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Blessing

May the One who brought forth Jesus from the dead
raise you to new life, fill you with hope,
and turn your mourning into dancing.

Almighty God, Father, ✝ Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you now and forever.

Amen.

Christ is risen, just as he said.

Go in peace. Share the good news. Alleluia!

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!