

Seventh Easter
June 2, 2019
Church of the Advent
Rev. Ellen Richardson

Do Not Leave Us Comfortless

On this Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension, the 40th day of Eastertide, we are reminded of the experience of the disciples witnessing the final leave-taking of Jesus from this world. From the Gospel of John, we eavesdrop on a conversational prayer from Jesus to the Father asking for care and protection of those closest to him that will be left behind. A story from The Book of Acts records a miracle from the disciples' early days of evangelism, and visions from the Book of Revelation promise that the trials and tribulations of new Christians would one day be over. These messages offer *comfort* meant for disciples of Jesus who had by this time grieved his loss more than once. Even though the Ascension was an event wrapped in glory, it still marks the abrupt *absence* of Jesus, with all the shock and confusion and questions of *what do we do now?* It is no wonder that our Collect for this Sunday asks God, *do not leave us comfortless.*

Have you ever been left comfortless, without anyone around to make things right that had gone terribly wrong, or help you through a rough patch? It happened to me once during high school, when my parents left on a business trip to New Orleans leaving me in charge of the house and my adolescent brother. We had groceries, a car, and a phone, so I thought it was going to be a piece of cake. Of course, this was before fast food, cable TV, computers, or cell phones, but I assumed we would be entertained well enough by friends and appreciate the freedom from parental supervision.

And then it started to snow-- in Atlanta, Georgia--and then the snow turned to ice, and then it got *really* cold, in the teens, and then the trees and power lines came down and for 3 days we had no electricity or phone. Driving, or for that matter walking, on ice covered concrete was not an option. I know that might almost sound inviting after the week of heat we have had here, but it was pretty scary at the time. A gas stove kept us from freezing to death as the inside temperature of the house sank to the 40's and the windows frosted over. We sat in our tiny kitchen with our coats on except for braving it to our bedrooms at night, sliding between two

sheets of ice until our body heat warmed up a space the size of a sleeping bag. *That* was a comfortless experience. Of course, by the time my parents were able to fly home, the ice had melted, the sun was out, the power was back on, and no description of our circumstances sufficed for them to comprehend how we suffered while they were gone.

I share this memory because it is one that helps me identify with the disciples, who must have had trouble watching Jesus leave, for as hard as he had tried to prepare them, no amount of prayer or warnings seemed to help them understand what was about to happen—that Jesus was leaving their human company for good, leaving them in charge, and that their lives would never be the same.

Right up to the Ascension, the poor disciples had 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 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? Instead, all that Jesus wanted them to believe, to understand, and to be—is expressed his prayer from John's gospel, spoken *after* Jesus had washed his disciples feet and *before* he 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 his whole young life. Making the case that his disciples were ready to graduate from being followers to being leaders, Jesus saw that their faith was solid, that they had learned everything they needed to know, and that their faithfulness to him counted for something. He trusted them, and he trusted God the Father to care for them, to protect them, to empower them, to *comfort* them, and to make them *one*—just as Jesus and the Father were One.

So just how did their story play out? According to Acts, down the road Paul and Silas found themselves in jail for trying to liberate a woman who was enslaved and trained to earn money for her traffickers as a fortune teller. They were arrested, stripped, beaten, flogged, and put into stocks, because being thrown into a prison wasn't punishment enough. We might imagine that this consequence of having been left in charge of the salvation of the world by Jesus was not the experience they had hoped it would be. Pretty comfortless to be condemned and

abandoned for doing just what they were supposed to be doing: finding those along their way who were most in need of love and redemption, and stepping forward to offer what love and healing they could. Later, in this story full of irony, their comfort came in the form of an *earthquake* that broke open the doors of the prison and offered them a route to freedom. Yet instead of saving themselves, they first considered the fate and welfare of the jailer, sharing the Good News with him and his family before being on their way. Their comfort did not present itself in the form of bypassing difficult circumstances, or avoiding obstructive people who undermined their work, or even taking advantage of a quick escape. Instead these disciples set their hearts on what they had been called to do, and the ones they baptized became the ones who took them home, fed them, and washed their wounds. In offering comfort they were not left comfortless.

What are we to make of this powerful message, that the prayer of Jesus to secure our comfort is something we can count on in our Christian journey? How are we to recognize that promised comfort when things do not always go as easily as we expect, or according to plan? How do we resist the temptation to give up in despair when this weary and hurting world does not seem to be interested in a message of love, forgiveness, healing and grace?

Ever fewer people in our Western society say that they even believe in God, and of those who do, ever fewer seek to belong to a community of believers. Whether wounded by church, or having never been in one, there are ever greater numbers of people these days who see Christian community as quaint or irrelevant or not worth their time. This is true across denominations, and no one has yet figured out quite what to do about it. Many describe themselves as “spiritual” without being religious, or practicing a spirituality that is *private*. Yet as we have unshackled ourselves from the expectations of Christian community over time, our world has become meaner and more isolating, and ever fewer people look to the message of Jesus Christ as a balm for their pain.

God calls all his precious beloved creatures into communities--safe harbors for worship, healing and the nurture of creative energy. Even as Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven to strengthen his disciples, to love them with the same love he showered upon his Son, to make

them one, he intended for them to go beyond merely establish groups of like-minded friends. They were to reach beyond companionship, beyond friendship, beyond similar tastes and preferences to become the manifestation of the love of God for each other, ready with support, forgiveness, and comfort to assist in a common call to discipleship to the whole world.

Long past the days of Paul and Silas kicking up the dust and staying in trouble, the work of building God's kingdom now belongs to every Christian believer, to every disciple, not just to the paid help like me. There is no argument that world *needs* the love of Jesus now more than ever, even as fewer seem to be seeking it than ever. We Episcopalians are not particularly known for evangelism, where the risks of rejection, and labels of self-righteousness lie in wait. Talking about faith can be uncomfortable in a culture that does not make it a priority unless it is being used to personal political ends. Most of us have probably been made uncomfortable by others who have confronted us with their particular expression of faith. But this does not mean that sharing the Good News should be impossible. I am not talking about cold-call knocking on doors, but rather being aware enough to see when the jailers we come across in our lives might need something we have. Over 80% of people who go to a church for the first time are responding to a personal invitation from someone they know and trust--just an honest invitation that speaks of the importance of Christian community in someone's life. That is really all there is to discipleship--attending, nurturing, and growing and living our own faith like it is important, and sharing it with others.

Next week, as each year, we will celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit crash landed into the lives of the disciples and gave them what they needed to get on with it. Their story is our story, and each and all of us are just as likely to be touched by the power of the Holy Spirit in due course, and filled with the comfort and courage needed to get to kingdom work ourselves, because we have been left in charge now, and there is much to do. Amen.