

Pentecost Sunday, C

Most of the time, most of us have difficulty to identifying with the original followers of Jesus. When we read about their accomplishments, we feel like Saturday golfers watching the Masters Tournament. All we can do is admire, applaud, and try to learn a little from the experts; but few if any of us ever expect to play in that league. But occasionally even the greatest golfers in the world hit a ball in the water, miss a two foot putt, or make some other mistakes. When that happens, the Saturday golfer must say to himself: hey they are not supermen; they are people just like me.

So, it is with the Apostles. They were spiritual giants, no question about that. But all through the New Testament are little reminders that they were also members of the human race, with the same weaknesses and problems as the rest of us. For example, in today's gospel reading, John sets the stage for that appearance with this rather revealing sentence: "the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews."

I think, everyone here can relate to that experience. Maybe we have never gone into hiding behind locked doors, but we all know what it is to be afraid. Fear is a common denominator of the race. For all of us, in one way or another it is a fact of life. And how we deal with that fact plays a large part in the quality of our living. So, we can learn something

from the experience of those disciples who had locked the doors of the place where they were.

To focus on that picture, let us first observe that sometimes there is good reason to be afraid. Those disciples who had barricaded themselves behind bolted doors were not an aggregation of neurotic cowards. They were, in the main, a group of normal, healthy – minded men. Their level of courage was probably about the same as yours and mine. But keep in mind that they had just been eye – witnesses of the cross. At Calvary they had seen a vivid example of man’s inhumanity to man, and that was a frightening observation. Their fears were rooted in some solid realities.

They were living in a dangerous world, and so are we. None of us has ever witnessed a literal crucifixion, and we probably never will. But make no mistake about it; the same prejudice, greed, hatred and cruelty that nailed Jesus to the cross are still very much a part of the modern world. In case you have doubts, read your daily newspaper. There you will find plenty of evidence that life on this planet is a risky proposition. Day after day, innocent people are hurt, plans are disrupted, dreams are shattered, and hearts are broken. In this world danger is not always an illusion. Those disciples who looked for safety behind closed doors had good reason to be afraid, and sometimes so do we.

But the story does not end there. Those disciples were visited by the risen Christ, and with his help they overcame their fears. Look at them in our reading from Acts. The very same men, but no longer cover behind

closed doors. Instead, they were out on the street boldly proclaiming the good news. The transformation is remarkable – the same men in the same world. Their circumstances were essentially unchanged. The dangers were still there and still very real. But the fear was gone, or at least it was under control. They were controlling it instead of allowing it to control them.

It seems to me that two factors were involved in the overcoming of their fears. The first was the change in the focus of their concern. Jesus said to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” That put things in totally different perspective. Up to that point, their main concern had been survival. That’s why they were hiding. They were afraid that Jews would do to them what they had done to Jesus. And that possibility did exist and continued to exist. In fact, many of them eventually died a martyr’s death.

My friends, if your main business in this life is your own personal comfort and survival, then you have got good reason to be afraid, because you are hooked up with a losing cause. That purpose is bound to fail. If violence or disease or accident does not get you, then old age will. There has got to be a bigger and better reason for living than to simply stay alive, and Jesus offers that – a mission worth living for and even dying for.

Next, he gave them the resources necessary for carrying out that mission. Our reading says, “He breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

One of the most frightening things about life is a sense of inadequacy. We have responsibilities to meet, and we are not sure we can meet them. Burdens come that must be borne, and we are not at all certain we can bear them. Well, the good news is that we are not in this thing by ourselves. God is with us. That is what Pentecost Sunday is all about. It celebrates the truth of God’s presence with his people. This is a dangerous world. To live in it is difficult at best. I am glad to know that I do not have to meet that challenge in my own strength. God is here, and the enabling power of his Holy Spirit can be mine.

When we realize that, then we can identify with the Apostles, not only in their fear, but also in the overcoming of that fear. **Amen.**