

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
5th Sunday of Easter Year A
May 14, 2017

Perhaps because I fly out later this evening, on an adventure to a small island, La Gonave, off the coast of Haiti, that is known to me now only through the eyes and heart of our son Andrew, that I am reflecting pensively about the other adventures I've taken in my life, other pilgrimages that have taken me to foreign countries or distant lands, and which have been a part of my larger journey into the heart of God. I've been pondering about what precisely on those other trips caught my imagination, that I wanted to capture in photographs, to bring back, to have as a visual image that could spark or evoke the experience I had encountered that touched my heart.

In the Holy Land, there were two areas which focused my attention and which I captured through the lens of my camera: the many crosses, of varying shapes and sizes, in Jerusalem and beyond, and also the expressions depicted in mosaics, drawings, statues, and icons of what it looks like to see salvation, to see the real presence of God here on earth through the person of Jesus. Seeing salvation shown in expressions of awe and amazement, of fear and trepidation, of remorse at one's betrayal to the Jesus before them, of bewilderment, of challenge, of disbelief, of pure delight and joy, and love returned back to the source of love.

Somehow, this week has been a journey down memory lane for me, so I was recalling the photos I took a few years ago while on my trip to Turkey, where we traveled to some of the sites of the early Church. What I remembered while taking photographs there were doorways; we saw a lot of ruins, much more so than in Jerusalem, where new churches had been built throughout the ages over the original holy site. In Turkey, we saw a lot of columns standing on a firm foundation, but where the walls collapsed around these towering giants, in ruins of piles of large black stone, in Ephesus and Didyma. Somehow, many of the arches of the doorways remained intact, even though the supporting walls did not, and they captured my imagination, both as a spark to visualize the family or commercial life that would have taken passed through these doorways many centuries before, but also as a larger metaphor, for the doorway, the passageway, the transition into this thing we call the Church, the way of following Jesus, the path toward meeting the divine, that was happening at these ancient sites as the Christian church began to be formed.

It seems to me that doorways, though they can be made of solid wood or steel, are actually liminal spaces, in-between places, a zone of their own definition. These thresholds can be spaces that invite and encourage others to peer inside, or they can be off-putting, barriers in their own right, that tell other that they don't belong, or they can be flung so wide and open that people just come right in, as family and close friends often do when entering one's own home. Doorways are spaces between rooms, which show up in the concrete, physical houses we live in or worship spaces we pray in, as well as the spiritual rooms that we create within our

hearts, rooms that some are invited to barge right into, rooms that some are tentatively invited to peek within, and other doorways that come with a bright red “do not enter sign”.

Our passage from John’s gospel today speaks about God making a room for us, that wherever we go, whatever we find, whatever threshold we must cross, life into death, or a deadened state of living into abundant life here and now, God will be there, ahead of us, waiting for us, anticipating and loving us. This is a comforting statement.

However, I believe there is also a challenge within this reassuring passage, for doorways allow passage from both directions, and that is that we need to attend to the room we are creating within our own heart and soul for the loving presence of God, through the person of Jesus. I’m wondering, to what extent can we honestly say, “wherever we go, whatever we find, whatever threshold we must cross, we have prepared a place of waiting and anticipation for God to abide there with us?” We may ask ourselves the question, “Is our doorway into the room of salvation, into the intimacy desired of God which gives us life, slammed shut against the trouble or chaos Jesus may cause there?” Do we hear ourselves wondering, “Who knows what Jesus would do if I really turned my life over to him?” Maybe we’ve propped the door open just a bit, testing the waters with the Divine, being satisfied with seeing a mere glimpse of what abundant life could be, but not really walking into that space. Or perhaps we have found the courage to fling wide-open our hearts and souls to the centering presence of God. If we are reassured that God has prepared a room for us, can we not imagine that God would desire of us to prepare a room for God, within our very being?

Jesus tells his disciples, in the farewell discourse, a part of which we heard today, “do not let your hearts be troubled.” This instruction comes after Judas has betrayed him and they are awaiting Jesus’ arrest. Jesus is leaving them, and like the images of people seeing the salvation which I caught by camera lens in the Holy Land, the disciples are challenged, bewildered, in disbelief, and look upon the source of love through their own eyes of love and are feeling great pain.

This happens to us too when we experience grief and loss, for grief and loss seem always to come unexpectedly and leave us bewildered and confused, acutely aware of our love for someone else, and often believing the path of life has betrayed us, challenged and in disbelief, feeling as though something was stolen, whether we are reeling from a death of someone who had not yet lived a full life or from the death of our 93 year-old grandmother, of whether it’s a loss of a dream or a future we felt entitled to. Jesus knew what loss felt like. He wept at the grave of Lazarus. One can say his tears redeemed all grief, making all our sorrow holy, for Jesus shared it so intimately with us. However, Jesus also taught us that being in the presence of the holy does not mean there is not pain, it merely means Jesus is present in the suffering with us.

Someone wise once said that, at these moments of profound transition, we need both a midwife and a chaplain: a midwife to be with us through the pain and anguish and to guide us into the birth of something new, and a chaplain to ease the grief and sense of loss. In each of

those situations, wherever and whenever we find ourselves at a threshold, we can ask ourselves the question “how roomy have I made that space for God to be here with me?”

For in the gospel of John, Jesus says there is only one thing that calms emotional distress, even though the world gives us multiple options. Jesus says it is only faith that will ease our troubled hearts. He says, “Believe in God. Believe in me.” This means that we ought to make room for Jesus, big and wide within our hearts and souls, and be outwardly committed to the way of Jesus. This is the interesting part, the paradox of the incarnate God: the place Jesus has prepared for us is actually within our own hearts, a spacious room already planted there, already to be occupied with intimacy with God.

This passage from John is often proclaimed and preached on at funeral services. Sometimes families choose this passage, I believe, because they are so certain that their loved one’s heart had such a large room prepared for God and from which they lived out through the way they lived their lives. This was true when we planned the service for Deacon Janice. Each one of us sitting in the packed pews knew that she lived from a place where she knew and loved God, and she was outwardly committed to the way of Jesus. We knew that this was true for her in her life and we all knew it was true for her in her death. It stated out loud what we knew to be true inside.

Other families who have chosen this passage for the service of their loved ones have come to me with almost an apology on their hearts, saying their loved one was “spiritual but not religious” and I often feel they choose this passage because they yearn for reassurance that God had a space prepared for their loved ones, whether they’d been in church or not; whether they’d been able to say the creeds without crossing their fingers behind their backs or not; whether they’d been able understand how Jesus could possibly be the Son or God or not. I reassure these family members that space with God, the state of intimacy with God is for all of God’s creation, as I think that this is what can trip us up from time to time about faith, when it contains belief in a too-small God.

But the piece we know about God from our passage today is that God has chosen not to be God without us. God’s promise, through this statement in the gospel of John, is that God has promised to love us, to make room for us, to know and be known by us, and that promise never ends, and, with that certainty, there is no reason for our hearts be troubled.

When we look within, through the doorways that lead into our hearts and souls, may we find the place of God, the place we have set aside for God, so that our lives may be touched with a peace that passes all understanding, for it is only God who can offer us that comfort. And the challenge to us is to match God’s preparation for us with our preparation for God. May that be so for you.

Amen.

