

Sermon – Proper 6 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma

Matthew 9:35 – 10:23 – The sending of the 12 apostles

Last Thursday I was on the Long Island Railroad going to a meeting in Manhattan with the Landmark’s Preservation Commission. As we trundled along I had a moment of wonderment. I chuckled as I thought about where I was. Not where I was physically at that moment but where I was in my life. I chuckled because in March of 2010 when I was in NYC visiting Columbia University I had a discernable visit from the Holy Spirit and since then God has uprooted me and brought me to the other side of the world and planted me in ministry as a priest here in Long Island.

Now people move around the world every day so such a relocation should not be that remarkable yet it has constantly amazed me how God has lead me through these past few years to a place where I feel like I am flourishing and every day it feels more right. It hasn’t been easy and at times it has been downright painful. Things seemed to turn around when I recognized that I needed to get out of the way of God’s plan for my life, for my truth.

I don’t know you all well enough to understand your life’s journey and whether you have experienced similar wonderment at God’s work in your life. For all of us that follow Jesus as his disciples we sooner or later must surrender our lives so that God’s plan for us can be enacted. This is what we refer to as dying to new life. For many people this pivot point in life might start with a major life event or search for answers to existential questions. For others, it may be a more gradual recognition that life is changing. For all of us it is a journey into a deeper and deeper relationship with God.

Scripture is full of stories of people who have made this journey. One of the earliest is the story of Abraham, called by God to be the father of many nations, and his wife Sarah. They were an old aged couple with no children, possibly something that pained them. When I read this passage I always chuckle at Sarah’s reaction to God’s promise of a child for her, and especially when she is caught out laughing at the prospect. Laughter is such a part of disbelief, and denial of this response such a human reaction to a sudden realization that it may indeed be possible.

Wonder and skepticism filled Sarah. When she heard the promise, she had a “yeah right” moment. It was almost too crazy a proposition that someone close to 100 years old could possibly conceive a child. But the Lord says to Abraham “is anything too wonderful for the Lord.” All things are indeed possible for God.

We might also have a similar reaction if someone told us our future, a future that seemed so preposterous against our current circumstances. We can never say never on our faith journeys. If someone had told me in 2010 that I would be a priest serving a Diocese in New York and that I would be a real estate manager packaging sites up for development I would have thought it ludicrous. But here I am telling you a snippet of my life story this morning here at St Mary’s.

The apostle Paul might have also laughed if someone had told him how his life was to be transformed. Rather being the pious and strict Jew that he was, someone who persecuted those

that didn't follow the law, he would become a follower of the very man that he sought to persecute and become one of his most influential followers that has existed. I am sure he would have laughed and been very dismissive. Paul's story of transformation is one of the most powerful stories in scripture.

Paul argues that through faith in Jesus we have peace with God and because of this peace we are filled with the grace of God. God's grace and our faith allows us to hope in a future where we can share this grace and peace with others. The journey he acknowledges will be tough. Paul suffered immensely during his new life as he sought to grow the church. He was regularly imprisoned and flogged and he worked hard making tents to support himself. His missionary work often brought him to tears.

Suffering is to be a part of our faith journeys as Paul himself testifies. He explains in the verses from Romans Chapter 5 that we heard this morning that in suffering we learn perseverance and endurance because we are powered by trusting God and the sure hope of salvation.

Through endurance we will grow and flourish as people, developing a character of hopefulness that all things are possible with God. If God can bless Sarah with a child at her advanced age, and if God can call me out of my old life in Sydney and set me to work here, anything is indeed possible.

It is necessary to understand that suffering is an important aspect of our lives as humans. It is a natural balance to pleasure. Without one we would not understand the bounds of the other. Trusting that we can endure suffering is character building if approached from the right state of being. There is a transformational aspect to suffering that isn't found in pleasure. Sometimes it is hard to discern what happens to us when we are suffering but often in reflection we can see how we were sustained and how we might have grown as a result.

The gospel message this morning ties into this theme. Jesus commissions his twelve apostles to go out into the world to heal people's bodies and souls. In sending the apostles out Jesus didn't equip them with backpacks full of life's necessities. Jesus sent them out with nothing other than their strong faith that their needs would be met by the people and communities to which they would go. These fisherman and tax collectors probably had comfortable lives before this yet here they were being commissioned to give up those lives for the sake of Jesus love for the world.

Jesus acknowledges that he is sending them out as lambs amongst wolves. They are offered a promise that they would not be alone in their travels and that in their faith the Holy Spirit would guide them and would guide their words when they got into trouble. There is a sense of comfort in that promise that we can draw on today as well.

Endurance in our Christian journeys will be rewarded with a deeper sense of God's presence that manifests as a trust that anything is possible. Our lives will become full as we journey deeper and deeper into our relationship with God, his son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We stand open to receive God's grace, freely given to us, and we hold onto the promise of God through all the ups and downs of our lives. As the going gets tough we can surrender further into God's presence. In the depth of that relationship we will be filled with wonderment and awe.

For those of you who are fathers or father figures in your families the message of today's readings might resonate with you. I can only imagine what a life altering experience it is to become fathers or to be father figures for young people. You might be filled with wonderment and awe too in those moments of spirit lead reflection.

No doubt the journey of fatherhood is not all smooth sailing and there are times of challenge and indeed suffering. The death or sickness of a child cannot be easy to accept or to process emotionally. Fathers often suffer in silence as they feel the need to be a strong presence to others. It is in those times that surrendering to God can open the door to truly feeling hope amid despair. It is this hope that can be life sustaining.

Jesus calls on all of you fathers, grandfathers, and uncles to witness for him amongst your families and friends by being true disciples. Jesus sent the apostles out amongst their own brothers and sisters, not amongst the outsiders, the Samaritans and the Gentiles. Jesus sends you out anew this day to give witness to him and his message of love, hope and perseverance. Trust that in giving witness the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say. All you should do is to be open to receiving God's grace which is of course freely given.

A blessed Fathers' Day.