

Sermon – 2nd Easter
Pastor Ken Nelson
John 20:19-31 & Acts 5:29-42
April 19, 2020

“Real Presence”

When I was in seminary, I was told preachers needed to keep one eye on the Bible and the other on the daily news lest their sermons lack relevance. I’m not certain I can keep that up much longer – the daily news part that is. I’m not sure in other words how many COVID 19 sermons I’ve got in me. By now most of you know that the order to stay home and limit contact has been extended through Memorial Day. Caution is a good thing – the well-being of its citizens is a proper concern of government - but I admit to being rather deflated by this week’s news.

So, I’m going to address you today on one aspect of our ongoing and now extended separation that is perhaps the most discouraging – the unity we share at the table of our Lord. In our Lutheran tradition we call all our gatherings “Holy Communion” because worship is first and foremost a public act of coming together – being in “community.” Even the term “liturgy”, which most of you know is the word used for our “order” of worship, comes from a Greek word meaning “*the work of the people*” and was suggestive in its day of “public works.” It was used to describe works done for the common good without regard for compensation.

In a sense, if we wanted to get fancy, and throw the citizenry for a loop, we could call our state, city and county “public works” employees “liturgists” – except for the pay part. But I digress. And while it brings me great joy to address you in the manner technology makes possible, the one thing it cannot create or replace, is our literal togetherness – our “public work” of meeting side by side, face to face, as worshippers of God Most High. The culmination of our public work each week is our “Holy Communion” – the extending of our hands and having placed in them our Lord’s body.

Our lesson today from John provides for guidance on the matter, while our lesson from Acts provides yet one more perspective to consider. In the Resurrection Day story from John, the oft maligned “doubting Thomas” is in full view. He is seen as lacking faith for insisting that “*unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.*” It’s clear Thomas wanted something more than the testimony of others – men who were privileged by the way, to have seen those very visible signs themselves which startled them out of their unbelief.

What Thomas wanted is to touch his Lord, to see alive the one who would forgive his doubt and to place his hand upon the marks of his salvation. For his insistence, he is, so it seems, chastised by Jesus. “*Because you have seen me you have believed ...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” At the time of course that would have included just about...no one. Everyone who believed had first been in the presence of Jesus.

Our Lord, if indeed he is tendering a chastisement, is nonetheless simply repeating what he prayed for not 10 days earlier, as recorded in John 17:20 when in the night he was betrayed he said “*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.*” Our Lord’s prayer was that doubters turned believers through the physical presence of their Lord would by the power of their testimony invite faith in those who would not ever see. Our Lord is not surprised by doubt, nor deterred by it. If faith was easy to obtain and maintain, it wouldn’t require our Lord’s constant prayer.

But what is most pertinent to our present situation from this story, is that the thing that turned Thomas’ doubt to faith was given him in the congregation of believers – it was in the assembly where the Lord’s flesh was presented to Thomas, just as it had been the others. Jesus waited eight days for the disciples to be together again, to grace their gathering, dispel their fear, and present himself to Thomas. I imagine

it wouldn't have been hard for Jesus to track him down during the week – say a hearty “*hey I missed you the other night.*” If the Lord wants us, He can find us. But the Lord wants to meet with us in a very particular way when we are together, where his body pierced for our transgressions can be presented in a very specific way, and in our Christian Holy Communion, eaten and drunk.

This quite unfortunate, if prudent extension of our time apart as a congregation will deny us the face to face contact we long for and which sustains us and of necessity, keep us from the table. Yes, private communion is practiced in the church - in the case of our communion visitation ministry most commonly, presented to one or two in their homes instead of many. But that is considered an extension of the many—the unity and peace of the body gathered delivered faithfully to those who cannot gather.

Yes, Jesus said in Matthew 18 “*where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.*” But that word still had in view an assembly and underscored that our Lord would build his church from modest beginnings and bring the message of forgiveness among even a few. Our time apart does not prevent of from hearing that word of salvation, and we shall continue to bring it to you as faithfully and forthrightly as we can. But the particular form of liturgy we call Communion cannot be conveyed in the same way – it is a word of peace and forgiveness which the flesh of Jesus alone can give.

It is for our sorrowing, troubled, fretful, anxious, conflicted yet hopeful souls that Jesus instituted, in the night in which he was betrayed, this en-fleshed word of peace. It is as though our Lord himself is saying to each of us “*place your hand here – touch my body - stop doubting but believe that I did this for you.*” As Lutherans we believe that the supper of our Lord is our Lord – as our confessions say “*the body and blood of our Savior Jesus, given with bread and wine for us to eat and drink*” – Jesus really, truly present with us. This is a mystery, which both requires and strengthens faith. Our Lord will wait upon us, as he did Thomas, to say it again, when we can gather, and until then not love or comfort us any less.

In this time when, as it were, we're confined to our "upper rooms" – doors locked for fear of an invisible enemy, we might use it to more fervently pray and long for the day our Lord will again be in our midst – bodily, sacramentally, and declare to us his peace.

In the meantime, we might also take time to consider, appreciate and pray for fellow believers around the world whose experience of faith is much closer to that of Acts 5. Brothers and sisters of the restricted, if not persecuted church around the world – places like China, India, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Egypt and elsewhere, where gathering to hear the word at all is complicated and often dangerous. We now have a sense of their isolation, and it might serve us well to draw from their witness to embolden ours. These are people who are not at all unfamiliar with "stay at home" orders that keep them from their churches all the time - who have heard authorities tell them, as the disciples in Acts 5 did – "*to not speak in the name of Jesus.*" – often absorbing beatings or worse as a reminder that those authorities mean it.

This is a moment to "share in the sufferings of Christ". When Christians share one another's burdens, they are lightened. When we share one another's joy, it is multiplied. It is a good time to be reminded of what Paul said then in his Epistle of Joy – Philippians – written from a prison cell, that "*our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ*" – where together, in the assembly, we'll see him and touch him, and receive his peace.

The Peace of the Lord be with you all. AMEN