6th Sunday of Easter - Cycle A  
May 21, 2017

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17  
Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20  
1 Peter 3:15-18  
John 14:15-21

Love Changes Everything

Last week Karen and I witnessed our son John’s graduate commencement ceremony at VT. Many thoughts and memories raced through my mind during those three hours sweating in Cassell Coliseum.

I worried about the hundred of miles that will separate his new home in Grand Rapids Michigan from his friends and comforts back in Blacksburg. I admired his willingness to strike out on paths unknown as well as his unwilling adjustments to arrive at this point in his life. Most of all I took comfort knowing that he had bits and pieces of his family stowed away securely in his heart.

I also reminisced of my graduation from Clemson some 35 years ago. While I’d long forgotten the ceremony or for that matter the heat inside Littlejohn Coliseum, I can still vividly recall standing outside afterwards, with one arm around my newlywed bride, wondering about our future together. I too was leaving college life behind for a job hundreds of miles away. But one thing was for sure: with my best friend by my side, I had nothing to fear. Our love was going to change everything.

Yes love changes everything. Love carries us beyond ourselves and changes our understanding of life. Life takes on new meaning - the meaning of hope, and new direction - devotion to our lover.

Last week our 1st reading from chapter 6 in Acts introduced us to the Church’s first Deacons, those “seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom”¹, and we heard of the apostles call for them to serve the Greek-speaking community in Jerusalem. Well today’s 1st reading from chapter 8 in Acts places one of the seven, Philip, some 40 miles to the north, far from his assignment of distributing alms for the poor.

You see he’s been carried by the Spirit of God out of Jerusalem away from the persecutions following St. Stephen’s martyrdom. Now in Samaria, we hear the devoted Philip doing the ministry of an apostle: preaching of Christ and working many signs. Apparently he’s very effective at getting their attention. They soon accept Jesus as Messiah and allow Philip to baptize them. Yes Philip, filled with the Spirit and the wisdom of our faith, was changing everything in Samaria.
My brothers and sisters, love changes everything. The once despised Samaritan community all become one in witness to Jesus’ resurrection. Luke tells us “there was great joy in that city”.

Amidst this Good News it’s important we not overlook Philip’s journey of devotion to Jesus. You see he was led by a chaotic wind, a spirit of spontaneity, a spirit which defies domestication, discipline, and predictability. One minute he’s charged with attending to the needs of Hellenist Christians in Jerusalem and the next he’s bringing multitudes of Samaritans to the faith in far away lands.

Throughout the Bible the Spirit’s work has a wild, unrelenting character to it. Yes it’s true that God’s spirit blows over the chaos of the waters to establish order in the 1st creation story. Then again it’s written that the Prophets go where the Spirit sends them and do whatever God asks, no matter how dangerous or odd. Ezekiel eats a scroll. Isaiah preaches naked. Jeremiah hides his underwear in a rock until it rots. Hosea marries a prostitute. The prophets admonish Kings, heal enemy generals, defy religious authorities. In the New Testament we hear of the Spirit’s words gushing forth from the mouth of Elizabeth the elderly and childless cousin of Mary and Spirit coming to Peter in a vision to baptize the Gentile centurion Cornelius. In a couple of weeks we’ll hear of the Spirit moving all those gathered together to speak in different tongues.

Philip, the Prophets, Elizabeth, Peter. Love changed everything for them and the world. Their love of God drew them to a wider, all-inclusive, all-embracing – a Catholic – perspective of life. Life took on the meaning of hope that doesn’t hedge bets or hold on to preconceived ideas but puts all one’s confidence in God.

My brothers and sisters, between the first cries of our birth and the resolved silence of our death lies a breeding ground for hope, a hope that embraces newlywed’s dreams, college graduations, new jobs, difficult coworkers, cranky kids, rebellious teenagers, mental illness, addictions, bad habits, prejudices, you name it.

Like Philip entering into Samaria, we are being guided by the Spirit to a glorious venture in obedience to Jesus by expressing that obedience in love. We are being called to witness to the hope that lies in the promise of Jesus’ resurrection, a hope which springs forth from a conviction of faith deep within our hearts.

Peter challenges us in our 2nd reading to “be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope”. Wow. We share this hope, not by grabbing folks by the collar or yelling "Sinner!" in their faces, but rather with a gentle, well-reasoned answer from our heart. Think of it as our 15-
second elevator speech to heaven. St. Bernard of Clairvaux describes the essence of his relationship with Jesus in this way:

You ask me how I could know his presence - because he is living and active. Scarcely had he entered me that he awakened my slumbering soul. He lightens the dark places, opens locked rooms, and heats what was cold. The uncovering of my hidden feelings has led me to [deeply] admire his wisdom; even the slightest amendment of my way of life has given me the experience of his sweet bounty. Seeing the renewal and reformation of my mind, I have perceived something of his beauty. The wonder of his greatness in all this has left me speechless.\(^{10}\)

My brothers and sisters: Jesus is inviting us to enter into a loving relationship with Him where we share the same desires in the same way he loves the Father. Jesus is inviting us for a ride of a lifetime on the wild jet stream of the Spirit, to be blown into the arms of the broken, and if the situation presents itself, share our personal reason for hope, for the love of Jesus changes everything.

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\(^{1}\) Acts 6:3  
\(^{2}\) Acts 8:8  
\(^{3}\) Ezekiel 3:1-3  
\(^{4}\) Isaiah 20:2-4  
\(^{5}\) Jeremiah 13:4  
\(^{6}\) Hosea 1:2  
\(^{7}\) 2 Samuel 12; also see 1 Kings and 2 Kings  
\(^{8}\) Luke 1:41  
\(^{9}\) 1 Peter 3:15-16  
\(^{10}\) St. Bernard, O.Cist., Doctor of the Church. St Bernard’s Sermons On The Canticle Of Canticles