

6th Sunday of Easter Homily, 2020

ACTS 8:5-8, 14-17, PS 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20, 1 PT 3:15-18, JN 14:15-21

Last week I shared an analogy of fog. It is hard to find ones way in fog. Dense fog can be especially disorienting because there is no point of reference. What we need is a point of reference, something to help guide us. Jesus is our true and eternal point of reference.

I mentioned how Covid-19 is like a fog that has settled on our world, nation and community. Keeping the fog analogy, I want to turn our attention to the pace of life in fog. One of the first things you do when entering fog while driving a car or a boat is slow down. It is hard to see so slowing down gives more time to react and make out what is around you and where you are going. At a slower speed you can more safely find your way.

One of the graces that has come to many in this Covid-19 pandemic fog is that we have had to slow down. With a state order to “Hunker Down”, and “Shelter in Place”, we have slowed down and stayed at home. We have worked from home, had less time in a car, less time in stores, less time with other people, and sadly, less time in church. Who would have ever thought we would not be able to worship together at Mass? Yet, God is with us. God is for us and this unique, challenging and foggy time is offering us a slower pace, a less hurried existence.

As we have slowed down, we are being called to be more intentional regarding our spiritual lives. What is the focus of our lives? Where we are going? How significant is our faith and what difference does it make in our lives? In the fog, you cannot travel on auto pilot. You need to be aware and alert.

We are called to see this time as an opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We are called to let this slower pace of life, lead us into a rhythm that invites growth and depth. I pray our spiritual lives will be stronger and that our love for Jesus will grow deeper.

I believe Peter, in our second reading, is giving us two essential commands for this foggy time in our lives. Peter is writing to people who are in the mists of the fog of persecution and his command to them is as significant as his command to us:

- I) Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.
- II) Always be ready to give an explanation for the reason of your hope.

I, Sanctify Christ as Lord of your hearts.

To Sanctify is to set apart. To make holy. We cannot make Jesus more holy, but we can, by God’s grace, allow the holiness of Christ and the Lordship of Christ to penetrate our lives and our hearts in ever deepening ways. To give Jesus the key to every room. To wholeheartedly live for Christ.

One little book that has been significant in my life is called, My Heart Christ's Home. It speaks about inviting Jesus into the home of our hearts, but goes on to express how we often leave him in one room. We get so busy, so preoccupied, so hurried that we forget Jesus is with us. And remember, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is always with us. Yet, his presence is often neglected.

Again, in this slower pace life, we have time to take Jesus into our whole heart and sanctify him as Lord.

Most of us believe that Christ is Lord. We believe in Jesus mentally or theologically. We believe what the Church teaches. We believe the Creed. Yet, Peter is calling us to a deeper personal place, the very center and core of our being, our very hearts and souls. We are called to something deeper than mental assent; we are called to heart-felt love. We are called to live wholeheartedly for Jesus - to fall in love with Jesus in such ways that we live heart, soul, mind, and strength for him and his kingdom.

The Jewish people would have been familiar with a similar quote. In Isaiah 8:13 Isaiah calls the people to, "Sanctify the Lord of hosts". Peter is saying, "Jesus is the Lord of host. Jesus is God in the flesh."

It has been said that the longest 18 inches in the world is the journey from our heads to our hearts. This is our journey.

There are no 5 easy steps to sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. It's just one room at a time. We have some time, some space in this Covid-19 fog to sanctify Christ as Lord in deeper and more personal ways than we have ever done before.

In our journey to sanctify Christ as Lord, I invite us to reflect on two Scriptures. First, John the Baptist says in John 3:30, "He must increase, I must decrease."

In order to sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, there has to be room. Our hearts are filled with many things. As we invite Jesus into every room in our hearts, we should ask, How can there be more of Jesus and less of me?

The Second verse is from Jesus Sermon on the Mount, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." As we fall in love with Jesus, as we sanctify Jesus as Lord of our hearts, may Jesus truly be our treasure and the love of our lives.

II) Peter's second command: Always be ready to give an explanation for the reason for your hope.

Sharing our faith, sharing your personal hope in Christ is a challenge that many find daunting, even overwhelming. Few things make Christians more nervous than giving what Peter calls "the reason for your hope." A survey once asked volunteers at a training session for a Billy Graham crusade, "What is your greatest hindrance to witnessing?"

“9% answered they were too busy to remember to do it. 28% said they felt they lacked the necessary information to share their faith. 12% said the greatest hindrance to their witnessing was the poor quality of their Christian lives. However, 51%, over half of respondents, said their biggest problem with sharing their faith was their fear of how those with whom they shared it would react.”

We do not want to offend anyone so we do not speak up. Yet, Peter is commanding us, in this foggy slower-paced time of our lives, to get through the fear and be ready to share. We are called to be prepared. Peter doesn't say, “Always be ready to send anyone who asks you a question to the priest.” No, he says, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks for the reason for YOUR hope!” Your personal experience with Jesus. Your personal faith. How Christ has been real in your life. How the resurrection is real in your life. How hope is alive in your life. How you have managed the difficult times in your life. What difference Jesus has made! The culture tells us that faith isn't relevant. We know Jesus is not only relevant; he is ultimate reality.

Robert Pierce, The founder of World Vision, a Christian global humanitarian aid ministry was known to say, “We are called to live our lives in such a way that people begin to ask questions for which Jesus is the only answer.” As we sanctify Jesus as Lord of our lives, we will be living in ways in which people will begin to ask questions. And we are called to be ready to give an answer.

Pope Francis calls all Christians to be “Missionary Disciples”. We are all not only disciples, followers of Jesus. We are all missionaries. We are all sent on a mission to share the love and truth of Jesus Christ to the world, including our neighbors and co-workers, our family and friends.

Pope Francis writes in the Joy of the Gospel, “In virtue of their baptism, all member of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization...The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization...Each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord...In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others.”

Listen again to David's words in psalm 66, our Responsorial Psalm:

“Hear now, all you who fear God, while I declare
what he has done for me.
Blessed be God who refused me not
my prayer or his kindness!”

Friends, this is not rocket science, it is love. It is wholehearted devotion to Jesus and a willingness to share what we ourselves have experienced. It is an expression of a heart that has sanctified Christ as Lord.

Any time we are called to be ready for something, we need to prepare. It takes time to prepare. We need space and often a slower pace. Now is the time to be ready. Now is the slower pace for us to prepare.

Musicians prepare. Athletes prepare. Teachers prepare. Painters prepare. Before you cook you prepare. Preparing is part of life. So too in our life of faith, we are called to prepare.

In order to be ready to give an explanation of the reason for your hope to anyone who asks you, I invite each of you to prepare a one or two paragraph explanation for the reason for your Hope. It can be longer, but most people's attention span is limited to a few minutes. Thus, if you prepare one or two experiences about your hope in Christ, and then share it aloud with another person, or to yourself in the mirror, you will be ready.

And remember, God has not left us orphans, but is with us through the power and gift of the Holy Spirit. You are not alone and when called upon to share your hope, God will give you all you need to share freely and joyfully. Do not be afraid.

If you are willing, Father Pat, Deacon Charles and I would love to hear or read about the reasons for your hope. Please email them to us. Or give us a call.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve