



Easter 6 (A)

Blessed Be God

[RCL]: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

“Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me.”

That feels *good*. Let’s say that psalm verse out loud, together: “Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me.”

How great it is that our God – the same God who took on flesh and lived among us, who was betrayed, tortured, killed, and buried – rose again and still, in spite of our continuing sinfulness, loves us. Not only does God continue to love us, God chooses to *abide* within us still. It’s all good news!

It’s not only good news – we’re also given some helpful direction in how to share this news with others. Paul helps us with that most difficult of all church concepts, evangelization.

Paul treats the Athenians with courtesy and seriousness. “I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship.” He didn’t stride into their space and begin by tearing down what was sacred to them. Paul took the time to walk around, see who they were and how they prayed. He noticed the altar to an unknown god, and he built on this. Brilliant! His thoughtfulness allowed the Athenians to hear him with open minds. What a lesson for us all. We’ve all probably had the experience of feeling diminished when someone comes into our communal worship life and immediately begins to change things without learning about us.

This is the way of love. Take the time to investigate the history of a place or a people. Learn about the things that are sacred. Appreciate the things that others hold dear, even if these things need to be dusted off and fixed. Remember, God has chosen to abide within us – everyone of us. This demands that we treat each other thoughtfully and, as Peter says, with gentleness and reverence.

Peter continues offering to his hearers and to us a look at what our life might be as we follow Jesus. While today’s readings sound, overall, like very good news, Peter reminds us that good news doesn’t automatically mean an easy life. Human nature will always be, well, human, with all the foibles and sinfulness, joys and

sadness, sickness and health, death and life that living in the natural world brings. No matter how hard we try to do good, we have our weaknesses and we all sin.

The thing that might seem most odd to us is that when we do right we often suffer for it. It's not terribly reassuring to hear that when we suffer for doing good it's a blessing. Suffering is not pleasant, whether it's as simple as having our feelings hurt or it's the ultimate price of losing our lives. The church has long told the stories of those who have lost their lives for their faith – sometimes gory, frightening stories that make us cringe just thinking of what the martyr suffered. We have martyrs even today who have lost their lives to gain eternal life. Archbishop Romero of San Salvador was shot and killed while celebrating the Eucharist by those who hated the poor. We have people like Mother Teresa who cared for the poorest of the poor and lived a life of self-denial and, at times, self-doubt.

We do good, but sometimes we suffer for it. It doesn't seem right. What keeps us from just giving up and caring only for ourselves? It has to be the focus of our readings today: love. It has to be the understanding that God loves us and that God's love is a deep, abiding love, not a shallow, fickle love.

God's love is our strength in suffering as well as in joy. So often we're tempted to wonder where God is when disaster strikes. We hear people ask where was God when the tsunami struck Japan or the earthquake leveled Haiti. We wonder where God was when tornados tear ragged killing wounds across our beautiful communities. We may even question how God could let something like that happen. Did God make it happen?

Those questions might even be too hard to wonder about. Where would we go for comfort if our God abandoned us like that?

What our passages today remind us is that the heart of God suffers with us. The abiding, strengthening heart of God wraps us in love and compassion when very human things or natural things threaten to overwhelm us. That love is often seen in those good works we thought about. A letter from an American woman living in Japan shortly after the Fukushima nuclear disaster speaks eloquently of the love that overcomes suffering:

“The Japanese themselves are so wonderful. I come back to my shack to check on it each day, now to send this e-mail since the electricity is on, and I find food and water left in my entranceway. I have no idea from whom, but it is there. Old men in green hats go from door to door checking to see if everyone is OK. People talk to complete strangers asking if they need help. I see no signs of fear. Resignation, yes, but fear or panic, no.”

This is God's abiding love pouring from person to person, heart to heart. Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them orphans and they would also be sent an Advocate to be with them forever. God doesn't cause our suffering; God gives us gift after gift to help us deal with life. The blessings Peter talked

about include God's presence in each of us. God's spirit stays with us, no matter how we behave. God is there to help, guide, comfort, and love.

Today it *is* all good news. We are blessed. We are loved. With the psalmist we can say with rejoicing:

Bless our God, you peoples;
make the voice of his praise to be heard;
Who holds our souls in life,
and will not allow our feet to slip.
Good news, indeed!

This sermon, written by the Rev. Susanna Metz, was written for Easter 6 in 2011.