

Third Sunday in Lent Year A

Trust in God's Love

[RCL] Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

What follows is largely based on the teachings of esteemed New Testament scholar John Knox, who wrote extensively about the context of today's Epistle.

Before examining the Romans passage, however, let us focus on the very familiar story in today's Gospel - the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. How did we come to know this story since no newspaper, video recordings, or the like existed in the first century? A clue comes at the end of the passage: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony."

Like these Samaritans, we know all we can know about the earthly Jesus because people like the disciples and the woman at the well told others about their face to face involvement with the one we call Christ. Those whom they told also told others who told others, and so on down the centuries until the story came to us. The passing of the Good News from one generation to another links us to the Jesus of history.

We can also understand this reality in reverse time – in the sacramental connection we all have with the early church through the laying on of hands by bishops who confirmed or received us. Those bishops became bishops when their predecessor bishops laid hands upon their heads as did every bishop's predecessor, all the way back to the time of the earliest Christian community.

So, we are linked to Jesus and the early church through word and sacrament carried across 2,000 years of actions. But there is more to this connection with Christ – more of a fundamentally personal nature, as St. Paul illustrates. We cannot know Jesus the way the disciples and woman at the well did. We can, however, know and experience the risen Christ as Paul experienced him. He never met Jesus in the flesh, yet he is the primary teacher of the fact that we can know Christ just as certainly as the disciples, but in a non-physical way. Knowing the risen Christ through the passed-down story of Jesus is most effective if we, too, come to know Christ as alive within us and among us.

Today's portion of the Epistle helps us understand this – as Paul begins by stating, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace in this context means a lack of enmity or an absence of conflict – that is, peace is unity with God that we gain through "our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace/unity with God that we experience in and from Christ is found in following Christ as Paul did and as must all who could not know the human Jesus.

This involves a restoring of the oneness that we, by virtue of our God-created nature, can have. It is a unity of God with us and us with all people, a unity of person and person, community and community – rightful relationships in God's over-arching presence.

Of course, nothing is clearer than the fact that human beings consistently live out of peace, in conflict with God and one another. Though we turn from God again and again and sin against one another, still we have access to ultimate unity with God. Paul explained how this unity/peace comes about. Most

importantly, he makes it clear that the process cannot be initiated by us – it begins only with God, with God loving us despite our unworthiness, despite our failure to love as God loves us, despite discord and conflict with other people. Despite all this, God forgives us and loves us unconditionally. Paul said it simply: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Enmity with God is cast aside by God’s forgiving action, which allows Christians to accept what God offers and live into what our Catechism defines as the “Mission of the Church” – which is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”

For Paul and the early church, the key to understanding God’s love and forgiveness was revealed by Jesus’ death on the cross. The proof of God’s love is Christ’s complete obedience to God despite the sinful acts that led to his death. Dying on the cross, Jesus forgives his enemies. This self-less death overpowers us and leads us to accept God’s love and forgiveness. Believers see pure love in his death and cannot resist its compelling power to follow in his way. We realize that Jesus makes us the most precious of creatures, even worth dying for.

God initiates the peace and unity and asks only our trust in his love and repentance from rebelling against his love - asks only that we accept the love, turn from our sin, and reform our lives, as a result. We don’t deserve the love and forgiveness, we cannot earn God’s love and forgiveness, but accepting it, we are freed by such faith. God provides the love; we provide repentance and renewal, becoming unified with God and others.

Dr. Knox observes that Paul and other theologians have throughout the centuries struggled to explain how Christ’s death accomplished this peace and reconciliation. All attempts to do so, in fact, have proved unsuccessful or, at best, are incomplete. However, he asserts, what is much more important is that Paul and the early church knew, above all, that God’s decisive action in history lay in Jesus’ death on the cross - that this action was absolutely essential to understanding the reality of God, God’s forgiveness, and the possibility of new life through accepting God’s love.

For Christians, Jesus’ death forms the singular focus on what God was doing through his life, death, resurrection, and the birth of the church. From the earliest days, the cross came to stand for everything distinctively Christian. It symbolizes both human sin and God’s all-giving love. It symbolizes both human sinfulness and human freedom from spiritual death, reconciling us to God, reuniting us with God and one another.

We are inheritors of the primitive church’s experience of the new reality of Christ-still-alive and of new life in the Spirit that was viewed through the lens of the cross. And now in our day, we, too, can experience in the life of the church the new community of love, no less than did Paul and the first Christians.

What we call the body of Christ, a living, flesh-and-blood reality, enables us to know Christ as a personal experience and not just a handed-down story. We are the continuation of the early community of believers within which everything about Christ happened. In this “dynamic community created around a living and present Lord . . . love is revealed, the Spirit is given, and faith and hope are found.” While it is in and through the church that the risen Christ is known, no body of Christian believers acts in the full image of the loving God, divided and conflicted as we are. And yet the church is our only link with the historic community that emerged from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is the only expression of Christ that we have, and even in its incompleteness, we, in our time, carry forward the new life of the Spirit of God.

We carry forward, too, the earliest expression of love based on Christ's death in the communal meal that we call the Eucharist. From the earliest days of the church, the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, have marked our central act of worship and given substance as a way to keep Christ alive in the midst of the worshipping community. We continue to gather at a common rail, drink from a shared cup, and commune in the deepest relationship of love with Christ and one another. This has always been for Christians THE occasion of re-calling Jesus to our presence and empowering us to unite with him and one another. Through the church and through this sacrament, we continue to express the reality that Christ was and is alive and will continue to be alive among his followers.

Dr. Knox summarizes it well. "We remember him whom we know. We know him whom we remember." And so, we can join St. Paul in saying, "We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Amen.

The following books by John Knox (1900-1990) are especially significant in dealing with the themes approached in this sermon: *Life in Christ Jesus: reflections on Romans 5-8*; *Chapters in a Life of Paul*; *Jesus: Lord and Christ*; and *The Church and the Reality of Christ*.

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