

Trinity Episcopal Church, Hartford
Year A – 5 Easter
May 18, 2014

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Last week on Good Shepherd Sunday we looked at how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was at the center of the evolving movement which gradually became known as Christianity. We compared other social, religious and political movements, all of which span decades if not centuries and continue to evolve – the struggle for equality for people of color, for women, for all people who are considered “the other” in any given context, and more recently with respect to gender orientation. I pointed out that with each of those movements, and many more like them, the outstanding characteristics included a passion for the cause, the willingness to personally sacrifice and take risks in order to further the cause, and the expectation that circumstances both internally and externally – both within and without the movement – can change and so the movement itself will necessarily evolve with in response to those changes. My point was that we as Christians in the 21st century need to stay in touch with our roots from the first century and recapture some of the passion and excitement that come with being part of a living, evolving movement.

This morning we pick up that theme with the 1st Letter of St. Peter. The author, who is either St. Peter himself or, more likely, one of his followers writing in his name, is writing to no particular Christian community but rather to a number of communities generally in the area now known as Turkey. These communities are being persecuted by the Roman authorities and have probably been banished from their homeland – they are often

referred to as “exiles” in the letter. In response to this situation, the author seeks to boost the spirits of Jesus followers by emphasizing that they are indeed part of a community – the community of the faithful in the Body of Christ. Being disenfranchised in the civil society, made to feel like they are nobody important, those who were hearing this letter must have found the letter’s words comforting: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. . . Once you were not a people, but now **you are God’s own people.***” (1 Peter 2:10).

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to us, the church of the 21st century, is hearing and owning that assurance of St. Peter: You are God’s people. A chosen race. A royal priesthood.

This passage from St. Peter is the New Testament reflection of what the Prophet Ezekiel writes in the Hebrew Bible about the valley of the dry bones – a story that is often read during our Easter Vigil. You will recall in that story how God sets the mortal before a valley that is filled with bones. The mortal wonders how they can ever be brought to life, and to his surprise, God tells the mortal, “You can bring them to life. Prophecy to the bones.” And being clueless as to why or how he is doing this, the man follows God’s instructions. And then, according to the words that God put into the mortal’s mouth, the bones slowly come together, and gradually sinews grow on them, and flesh comes upon them, and skin covered them. But yet, there was no life in them. They needed spirit, or breath in the Hebrew Bible. And the Lord beseeches the mortal to prophecy to the breath, invoking the

breath to come from the four winds upon those that were dead, that they may live. And sure enough, the breath comes into the bodies, and they live, and stand on their feet, forming a vast multitude. The passage concludes with the Lord addressing the multitude: ***O my people, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil, then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.***

Just as the spirit of God breached into the multitude to form the renewed People of Israel, so the author of Peter says will the Spirit of God, working in and through the people to whom he is writing, mold them into a holy priesthood – a spiritual house, as he calls it.

Now there is an interesting thing about this spiritual house. The writer counsels, ***Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.*** He doesn't write, "Build yourselves a spiritual house." He writes, ***Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.*** You see the difference? If we are building the house, we are deciding what it will look like, what materials we will use, where it will be located, what color it will be, and so on. That's not what God is asking us to do. We're being asked to allow the Spirit of God – like God's spirit in the dry, lifeless and disconnected bones – to form us into a spiritual house, the body of Christ, for the purpose of doing God's work and furthering the mission of Jesus Christ in the places where we live and worship.

Note also that it is a *spiritual* house that we are building. That may involve a building, but not necessarily. The important thing is for us to allow ourselves to be molded into a spiritual house before moving on to anything

else. Our primary role is to listen, to understand where God is leading us, and making ourselves available to grow into our role as a member of that ***chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who calls us out of darkness into his marvelous light.***

Now sometimes we have a little problem with this “making ourselves available” part. We can work on the listening part, and we often work pretty hard at the opening ourselves to the spirit part. But the making-ourselves-available part and the coming-out-of-the-darkness part can be a little scary for us. A couple of weeks ago I was speaking to a few of our members, who would prefer to remain anonymous, about their frustration at being unable to recruit some new people to assist in a particular ministry. One of them said, “People say, ‘Oh, that’s not my thing.’ Well, it wasn’t my thing, either. But you know what? Somebody else saw something in me that made them think I could do that ministry, so I thought, well, let me try it. And you know what? I found out that I really did have something to offer that ministry. And in the process, I got to meet some great people I would have never become friends with and I learned something as well.”

Isn’t that a great story? It is a wonderful, 21st century example of exactly what Ezekiel and the author of 1st Peter were writing about. And in this religious movement that we call 21st century Christianity, that’s exactly what God is calling each and every one of us to do. We heard it in the last line of that beautiful anthem the choir offered just a few moments ago, ***Greater Love: I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that***

ye present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus, speaking to Philip, says this another way: ***Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.***

As Protestants who are also catholic, let's be clear: Jesus is not saying "do the works" *in order that* we may be saved. No, that's bad theology. We do work in the name of Jesus precisely *because we know we are saved*, and because that's how members of the Body of Christ, this spiritual house, that's how we ***proclaim the mighty acts of him who calls us out of darkness and into the marvelous light.*** We allow the light that is Jesus into ourselves, and then we ourselves reflect that light to the world.

Today will be my last Sunday among you until August 31 as I leave for my professional development leave. This will provide me a much-needed opportunity to reflect upon my own ministry among you and to study the ways in which this Spirit of God is building up other spiritual houses in other communities in other parts of this country and of the world. For me this time necessarily needs to be "away." But my time away will not bear much fruit if you – each of you – do not take the opportunity during my absence to reflect upon your own ministries, both in and outside of the walls and the programs of this church. There are some specific ways in which I pray this work will continue:

1. Remember the Minister at Walgreens, the pharmacist who considered her customers as her congregation, those to whom she ministered. Continue to look at the ways in your everyday lives that you can do the works that Jesus does.
2. Our Mission Discernment Initiative Group, which has been meeting since September, will be reaching out to our surrounding communities – both in Asylum Hill, where our spiritual home is located, and in the communities in which many of us live – to see the ways in which God is already at work and the places to which God may be summoning us as a congregation to further that mission.
3. At the same time, our consultant Partners for Sacred Places will begin the work of learning who we are as a community, giving us a friendly and objective observation report of the ways God is already doing a good thing here at Trinity, the opportunities for growth as a community of faith, and an assessment of the gifts that we bring to engage those opportunities.
4. Our Vestry will be working on ways that we can grow as a community: Ways in which we can grow in discovering who we are; ways in which we can grow in fellowship, knowledge and understanding of one another; ways in which we can open ourselves to become part of the “spiritual house” into which God is attempting to mold us.
5. And finally, I pray that each and every one of you will think of at least one way that you can give back to the work of this church. We have at least three functions as a church: First, to gather as Christ’s

people as described of that early Christian movement in the Book of Acts we read last week: to devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Second, to be strengthened by both the hearing and preaching of the Word and participation in the Sacrament. And the third function is really the purpose for which we do the first two: To serve others, in the name of Christ, to the Glory of God in the Holy Trinity.

I hope that you will not forget this third function – the need that each of us has to allow the Spirit to work through us, perhaps even in new and unexpected ways. When the summer is behind us, I look forward to returning to share the new things I have discovered, and to hear of all the ways that you are continuing to grow into “the spiritual house” that God has planned for us.

And now to God the Creator, God the Redeemer and God the Sustainer, be all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.