

"The Two Ways"
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
12 May 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

I John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

INI

Coming to the End of this Week of Sundays

Every Easter Season, which is made up of a week of Sundays (the first Sunday of Easter, the second Sunday of Easter) always makes me think of a novel by John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*. In it a minister, a priest, is deposed by his bishop for having an affair with his organist, and is sentenced to spend a month at a retreat center, writing something original (a sermon, a sermon to himself?) each and every day of the month. It is then, a month of Sundays. We travel with him down a difficult pathway as he deals with his cheated upon wife, his parish, his bisexual curate, his bishop, and others. Why I am reminded of this during the Easter Season is that we like this clergyman are called upon to be witnesses to the resurrection. We, like Thomas, may have our doubts, or like Mary Magdalene, may not recognize the resurrected Jesus. Tom Marshfield (also known by many other names in Updike's novels) is like the man (or woman, for that matter) that walks between two paths in the Psalm for this morning. He struggles to make sense of his choices, and that is Updike's constant theme, especially in this trilogy based on *The Scarlet Letter*. Written in the late seventies, as the presidency was struggling to survive the sins of Richard Nixon, the time then, seems like a time now, as we struggle to understand not only Easter, but the entire world as well.

What would you write as your sermon for our time?

What would command your attention as you looked at both church and world? What would command your faith with a God who is suddenly absent. (It is the Sunday after the Ascension, after all.) We are living in a time full of Tom Marshfields, or Pamela Marshfields. We are challenged by the mores of our time which seem to be disappearing from life itself, and especially from the lives of those we had hoped to admire and to follow. What would it be like to keep a journal of decisions made – decisions between good and evil, or between mattering and not mattering, or between caring and not caring. It might be an interesting thing for all of us to do. To keep a spiritual journal for several weeks, admitting everything, absenting nothing. And what would we do at the end of the month of sermons written to ourselves? I would propose that we would gather together and have a service of confession and absolution, taking in earnest the words, "I forgive you." We might even be called to forgive someone else.

It is interesting that in the first reading, Luke recalls the election of Matthias. And why was this election necessary? It is because Judas had left the company of apostles and disciples and had committed suicide. And yet, Judas had his feet washed, was fed at the Last Supper, and was a recipient of God's mercy. Was he not? After all, it is Matthew who reminds us of Judas' regret following his betrayal of Jesus. The twelve, however, needed to be twelve and so they voted on one who would replace Judas and carry on the ministry that he had so intimately been involved in. He was not the only one who made the difficult decision about Jesus. There was also Peter and his denial. "The cock crew and Jesus looked at Peter and he wept bitterly" Judas and Peter walking the same path as every man and every woman. I wonder if they kept a journal in their heads.

The Two Ways

So what can advise us in this life dilemma? Artur Weiser calls the psalm for this morning, "The Two Ways," and that is an excellent way to characterize it. It begins, and by default the whole collection begins with a beatitude – a blessing. It becomes a psalm that contrasts negative behavior with positive or righteous acts. The first verse describes what a righteous person is not. The second verse begins, in the New American Bible, with "rather." "Rather (than walking in the counsel of the ungodly, their delight is in the law of the Lord."

There is another way, another choice that is described with the image of a tree planted near abundant water. Such a description is also seen in Jeremiah (17:8): "They are like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream: It does not fear heat when it comes, its leaves stay green; In the year of drought it shows no distress but still produces fruit." If you will remember the readings from a couple of Sundays ago, where Jesus describes himself as the Vine, and we as the branches, that produce good fruit. These are not righteous just "in season," but also in times of difficulty and stress as well. The food for this tree is the Law of God – a constant joy and meditation. Does it accuse us? Sometimes. Does it lead us? Always.

With verse 4, we see a second part of the psalm, which compares the behavior of the wicked with that of the righteous. Here the image is of the dried-up chaff, the leavings of wheat – driven by a hot wind. These images of trees sumptuously living by living water, and chaff dried up by the wind give an almost proverbial and wisdom-like nature to this psalm. It closes with two ways – that of the just, which exists in the knowledge (read experience) of the Lord, and the wicked, leading to ruin.

The Spirit

Finally, are we left alone in this dilemma? In the novel Tom Marshfield is consigned to spending a great deal of his time alone – time thinking on his decisions, his failures, his vocation, his future. In the Gospel for this morning in the so-called "High Priestly Prayer" Jesus recalls all that he has done for those who followed him. Listen to the verbs, they received the Words, protect them, I guarded them, they may have joy. The real clue and the final clincher is this, "Sanctify them in the truth." And there it is lurking beneath the surface in his prayer with the disciples, the promise of Sanctification – the gift of the Holy Spirit. There is a name for the Holy Spirit that isn't

used all that much. That name is "the Paraclete." The Greek means, the one who walks right next to you, supporting you, accompanying you, guiding you. So as we walk between the two paths, the way of the ungodly and the way of the righteous, know that the Spirit walks with us – guiding us into the way that honors God, neighbor, (and hear this) that honors self. That is what the week of Sundays has been all about, waiting for the Spirit, and walking with her into life.

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