

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A

I hear a lot of people these days saying they just want things to get back to normal. We are tired of all the disruption that the COVID-19 virus has caused to life as we knew it. Some people seem ready to acknowledge that we will *not* be “going back” to whatever normal was. And I suppose part of whether we are longing to go “back” to what we had, depends largely on *what we had!*

What we are experiencing is nothing less than an expression of death and resurrection. There is literal death, yes, in those who have been taken by the corona virus. But we are also experiencing and grieving the death, the loss, of our lives as we knew them. When I taught a class on Death & Dying at CMU, and when I gave hospice workshops on grief, I would tell people that grief is our emotional response to loss. That emotional response is going to be dependent on what I have lost, and what the loss means to me. Two siblings may have entirely different responses to the death of a parent if the parent was an abuser of one of them and a champion of the other, but both will grieve; both will have an *emotional* response to the loss – even though the meaning of the loss will be quite different for each of them.

In our current situation, we are grieving. We are responding emotionally to the losses we are experiencing. The trouble comes when someone else tries to tell us what the meaning of our loss is for us.

In our first reading today from the book of Acts, Stephen – who had been one of the ones chosen to wait tables and distribute food to the widows and orphans – is under attack by people in the local synagogue. They make accusations against him very similar to the accusations made against Jesus – that he is going against their religious tradition, that he is going to tear down their temple, their church – literally or figuratively. “They set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.’”

When the high priest asks Stephen if any of that is true, Stephen launches into a sermon that lasts 53 verses, in which he recounts God’s interaction with God’s people from the time God called Abraham until the time of Jesus. This sermon is not in our lectionary, meaning we never hear it read in our Sunday services, but it is well worth reading – so find today’s passage in your Bible and then go back to the beginning of the chapter.

Stephen ends by saying, “You stiff-necked people...you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.”

And that is where our passage today begins, with Stephen announcing that he sees the Son of Man – the Christ, in other words – standing at the right hand of God. – What Stephen has done, in his sermon and in saying that God is present – is call into question all that the people have been holding onto as the order of things in their normal day-to-day life. Remember the charge they brought against him: ‘This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.’”

For those people, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, mean the loss of their lives as they have known them. Because if people keep following this way of Jesus, if people follow Stephen’s example and care for the widows and orphans, if people keep following the way of Love that Jesus lived, then the control of those in power will be broken.

And the emotional response to even the *threatened* loss of power is outrage and hatred and violence. Stephen's stoning is a result of the people's unwillingness to accept the change that will result if the image of God revealed by Jesus is allowed to be shared. In order to keep things as they are, to avoid seeing things in a new light, in order to get back to “normal,” they are willing to kill someone.

That all sounds preposterous, outrageous even – until we read the news. A black man jogging where some white men thought he should not be is shot dead. A security guard telling someone at a Dollar General store they need to wear a mask to protect the lives of others is shot dead. A government that does not want to spend more money on unemployment compensation tells businesses they can or *must* open up even when it is not yet safe to do so, so that the business owners will have to pay, and so that the workers cannot continue to collect unemployment, because the economy’s health matters more than the lives of those at the bottom rung of the ladder of success. In order to keep things as they are, to avoid seeing things in a new light, in order to get back to “normal,” they are willing to kill someone.

In our gospel passage for today, we hear words that we often hear at funerals. “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places...” The word Jesus uses is actually the same word used elsewhere in this section of John’s gospel, the “last discourse” – the last words of Jesus to his disciples. The word is really “*abide*” rather than “*dwell*.” We hear it later when Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” And “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.”

So when Jesus says, "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places..." –hear, “In God’s house, there are many abiding places – many ways to *abide* in God...” - I see there a wonderful assurance that in God, there is room for all of us: Those who have been faithful, and those who, like Peter, have a history of denying God; those who are life-long believers and those who slip in the door of faith from time to time.

But even with that assurance, Thomas still says basically, “Lord, everything is chaos. We don’t know where you are headed with all this, so how are we supposed to get there?” and Jesus says, “You get there by following me. By living my way, my truth, my life.”

Our belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is hard – because it means that in every experience of loss, every experience of death, there is some new life, some resurrection simultaneously present. There is an occasion, an *invitation* to *ABIDE* in God’s love, to live *out* of that love.

In the death we are experiencing now – the loss of our way of life as we have known it – we are being given an opportunity, an invitation to *abide* in God’s love. That is one response to loss that is open to us. If we choose to live out of love, we will not be able to go back to ‘normal’ – whatever that was – because normal did not work for everyone. *That* “normal” was some people having no access to health care or enough food or a living wage while others have more than they could ever count. That “normal” was living in more isolation from one another, really, than we are experiencing now! No, if our response to all this loss is to choose to abide in God and God’s love, then we will have to acknowledge our partnership with God in creating a *new* normal – where our eyes are open to see that each person really *is* my sister or brother, and when I am willing to offer to *all* children what I would offer my own children.

We are going to close our prayer today with Doug Sheperdigian singing “Amazing Grace.” The words were written by Anglican clergyman John Newton in 1772. Among other things, Newton was involved in the slave trade for many years prior to becoming a priest. And though he never specifically linked the hymn to anti-slavery sentiments, the hymn has been used for decades in many different social justice contexts. It is a hymn that moves many people. Remember those questions in sermons past about, “What makes my heart move?” - American scholar James Basker, who wrote *Amazing Grace: An anthology of Poems about Slavery*, had this to say about the power of this hymn and why he chose to use it in his title: “there is a transformative power that is applicable ... : the transformation of sin and sorrow into grace, of suffering into beauty, of alienation into empathy and connection, of the unspeakable into imaginative literature.”ⁱ

Let that hymn be for us today an invitation to abide in Grace – to abide in the Presence of God – and to find there room for us all.

Amen.

- [Acts 7:55-60](#)
- [1 Peter 2:2-10](#)
- [John 14:1-14](#)
- [Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

• ⁱ Basker, James (2002). *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660–1810*, Yale University Press. [ISBN 0-300-09172-9](#) p. xxxiv