

“Faith is not genuine unless it
is tinged with a trace of doubt.”

Whenever I am experiencing moments of doubt regarding my faith, I head for St. Mary’s Cemetery in south Minneapolis. The cemetery has become a “depository of faith”, a sacred ground containing generations of ancestral bones as well as stories of faith, hope and love. It is not difficult to hear the voices of my father and mother, especially in the changing of the seasons when winter morphs into spring. The voices offer lessons of fidelity in moments of uncertainty and words of encouragement when life has gone awry. A recent visit evoked a fragment from T. S. Eliot’s poem, “Little Gidding”:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

It did not take long to rediscover a sense of peace. Grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts rest side by side. Separate generations linked by a common DNA and the reality of death. With the most recent addition of my sister Molly, a new generation was added to the family plot three years ago. These generations were keepers of the faith, lovers of laughter and good story tellers. The visit to the cemetery would provide me with the courage to enter, once again the Easter season, preparing me to listen to the stories of creation

found in the Book of Genesis and the promise of Jesus' Resurrection in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The stories of faith and hope continue to be found in the scriptural readings discovered in the Sundays after Easter. Indeed, the gospel reading (John 20:19-31) for the Second Sunday of Easter invites us into the question of personal faith and doubt in a very dramatic way.

Jesus had appeared to his disciples on the evening of the day that he rose from the dead. Thomas, one of the disciples, was missing that evening and found it hard to believe that the Lord had really appeared to the other disciples. Confidently, Thomas said:

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,
and put my finger in the marks of the nails and
my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Eight days later, Jesus would appear to the disciples and Thomas was with them. Jesus challenged Thomas “to put his finger and hand into the wounds.” Jesus said to Thomas: “Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas simply answered: “My Lord and my God.”

The theological significance of recognizing Jesus as “Lord and God” would testify to the reality of the messianic hope being realized in the person of Jesus. The question Jesus posed to Thomas (and, of course, to all of us) would become the learning curve of real faith: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.” What will it take for any of us to believe in the resurrected Jesus? What wounds must we discover in our lives or the lives of others to experience the saving grace of Jesus Christ?

Searching for faith and hope amid a world filled with pain and suffering becomes an on-going challenge for all of us. Putting aside the demand for some ideal community of faith, we are free to

discover the Kingdom of God in the wounds of our daily lives. There is no ideal Christian community that can assure us of a “perfect faith.”

However, after today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47), the portrayal of the early Church hints at an ideal form of community:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common, and would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as they had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread in various houses and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. Praising God and having good will for all.”

The idyllic community of faith was dependent upon the Apostles challenge to share all things in common. The desire to “break bread together” would initiate the institution of the Eucharist as a reminder of Jesus’ “last supper” with his disciples.

As the Church grew in numbers and in different locations outside of Jerusalem, Paul’s assessment (1Corinthians 11) of Christian communities became a critique: “I hear that when you meet as a church, there are divisions among you.” Paul’s complaints would confront the selfish and drunken behavior of members who treated the Eucharist more like a first come first served pot luck dinner. Paul’s analysis would highlight the need to reverence the Eucharistic community as the real body and blood of Christ and not simply a place where bread and wine were distributed for meals together. The theological development of the Eucharist would evolve and the liturgical celebrations we now experience as mass would emphasize the Real Presence of Jesus in the community.

The real sinfulness of any community is based upon its exclusion of individuals from participating in the Lord's Supper. While it is important to present an "ideal community" as a living hope, the reality we face is a church filled with diversity and theological division. Unfortunately, the historical divisions between Christian denominations remain as a norm. On all too rare occasions, the creative work of the Holy Spirit amazingly appears to challenge a visibly fractured Church with invitations to love and forgiveness. Periodic reformations have produced charismatic leaders who can lead us into glimpsing vestiges of an ideal community. I suspect that Pope Francis is one of those leaders. In a recent statement by Francis, he reminded us: "Faith must be renewed and refreshed again and again. God does not give us faith by dictating abstract truths; rather God is revealed in history by God's willingness to enter into the joy and the suffering of the human community, the Church."

Having recently finished the celebration of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Easter challenges us to renew the face of the Church. Perhaps a basic form of conversion might be a willingness to be nice to one another, even at a distance. Like the celebration of the resurrection, we must be willing to bring back to life a community of faith, even amid our doubts. Recapturing the enthusiasm of the early Church will never guarantee immunity from suffering and pain; however, standing in the shadow of the cross, we must be willing to put our fingers and hands into the wounds of Christ as they are manifested in the real problems of the world. We are, once again, invited to become the wounded healers of our generation. While faith is not genuine unless it is tinged with a trace of doubt, all of us must risk a leap of faith, even at safe distances. During this catastrophic pandemic, we can seek the certainty of hope in the intersection of faith and science.

Looking intently at the grave markers located in the family plot, my grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts all survived the

Spanish Flu of 1918. In a newspaper clipping dated, November 7, 1918, the public notice read: “In order to prevent the spread of the Spanish Influenza, all schools, public and private, churches, theaters, moving picture halls, pool rooms and other place of amusement. Including Lodge meetings are to be closed until further notice. All public gatherings consisting of ten or more are prohibited.” In the words of Yogi Berra, does the Covid-19 crisis seem like “déjà vu all over again?” Perhaps a walk in the cemetery of your choice will offer all of us a chance to hear the dead speak about the need for a living faith, especially in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We must face our fears with faith and facts. In the immortal words of the poet Robert Frost: “In three words, I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life. It goes on.”

Peace, Fr. Joe Gillespie, O.P.
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