

Friends make your life better Short Address on Pentecost 2020

Sisters and brothers, it is such a joy to see you all here in church. I can hardly express how lonely it has been without you – not only in here on Sundays when I still came to be available...

but also, in my everyday life. We were in touch, in so many ways, but it is not the same. The hugs and the closeness were missing, the physical contacts were missing: no touches, no handshakes, no backing you up and easing your pain, no... So many “nos”. And even though we can now meet physically there are so many rules which shape the way we are allowed to meet and not permitted to meet...

Some of us are / were only lonely and alone, others got quite depressed, and still others fell ill, physically ill, really ill because of the aloneness the shutdown was forcing on them. The pain was / is unbearable, - and incurable – no painkillers help when the soul aches to an extent that the body gives in...

It is heart-breaking to see how poor many of our lives have become!

A congregation is a school for love - ...I came across this sentence in Bishop Robert Schnase's book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”. I have known this book over ten years now, and it still inspires me, and I know many of its passages by heart. I love the fact that Schnase says that it is God's plan for us to live in community, and that it is the community in which God's Spirit forms us, that it is the community where we learn – learn all sorts of things, and last but not least how to give love and receive love. And Schnase means the real, the physical community, the community in which so many of us have found really good and life-changing friendships.

Let me share with you some sentences from an article in the New York Times:

“Researchers are only beginning to pay attention to the importance of friendship and social contacts in overall health. Older people with a larger circle of friends are less likely to get brain damage, and they are dying at an older age.

Friendship has a bigger impact on our physical and psychological wellbeing than family relationships... Having friends is protective, it makes strong and confident and healthy... Practiced friendship is an undervalued resource. The message of so many studies of sociologists, psychologists and brain researchers is that friends make our life better...”

And with all that we look back on 2 & 1/2 months of social distancing, and shutdown of our everyday lives... We haven't seen and touched each other for over 10 weeks...

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It was a heart's desire to me to be able to open the church today. Pentecost is the day on which we celebrate the coming of the holy spirit. The spirit which came as it is described in Acts, like a rushing wind, a flickering tongue of fire, which sent those gathered together out into the streets to the crowd, to tell them what was happening. This is the Spirit which made them so excited that people thought that they must have had too much to drink – at nine o'clock in the morning. This is the Spirit which calls us to move as well – to act, to take courage, to live the heights and depths of the life God gives us, to

pray, to weep, to sing, to grieve, to be angry, to laugh, to confess, to challenge, to change – ourselves and the world we live in.

The story of Pentecost begins with the disciples on their own in a room, shut up alone, in their tight-knit group. The Spirit comes, and suddenly they are on the street amongst the people gathered from throughout the world, shouting about what God had done. The Spirit turned them, opened them, shifted their focus: they were now free from fear. The events of Pentecost had called the Jesus followers into the freedom of God! God's grace sets people free and gives them courage.

God's spirit at Pentecost came to a group of people, not to lonely individuals. And the group grew bigger the more courageous and outgoing the spirit-inspired followers of Jesus became... That has always been and will always be the message of the Pentecost story in Acts 2, but also the message of countless Bible stories in the Old and the New Testament. Many great deeds were done, many miracles worked, many processes of liberation brought forth by people living and working together - in community.

So, how do we deal with these insights in a time in which we are forced to stay away from each other and have only virtual or spiritual or theoretical relationships?

What does it mean in these times of Corona to do what is right in God's eyes? To be called out to move beyond the narrowness of many lives into the wideness of God's mercy, God's love, God's friendship? How can God's spirit of freedom inspire our limited lives? How can rushing winds break into our lives with a freshness that we haven't felt for weeks? How?

I have no answers to that.

I only have the knowledge and the deep genuine experience that sometimes – sometimes when our lives seem to have reached the lowest point, dreams can carry us through! Dreams which God is giving us... Visions of a new heaven and a new earth that will come true. And while we are waiting and dreaming, let us stick to the faith that God is in there with us, to the hope that one day things will be different, and to a love that blossoms surprisingly and unexpectedly between people, because it is God who is giving it – now and forever. Amen.

Let us now sing: We lay our broken world in sorrow at your feet...