

3 Easter C - 18 April 2010
Acts 9:1-6 (7-20); Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19
Jim Stockton

Someone has said, 'The road to joy is always under construction.'

Seven of the eleven remaining inner circle of Jesus' friends are gathered again, and oblivious of anything left to them to build together, Peter announces that he is going fishing. Peter is returning to be what he has always been. He is turning to what he has always done. It is at exactly this place that Jesus will appear to Peter to shape his path forward.

In similar fashion, Jesus appears to Saul of Tarsus literally on the road. Personally ambitious, as he will confess in the letters that the Church will read in later years; yet, Saul of Tarsus, not yet Paul the Apostle, is committed to something greater than his own career. And this may be an important character trait in this one whom God chooses to bear tremendous responsibilities for the spread of the Good News that Jesus is risen.

In churches like our own, where these two passages of scripture are being read today, Christians have a unique opportunity to hear and imagine the callings of both Peter and Paul. And one thing I hope they will learn, and that you and I learn here today, is that in the respective calling of each, there is a common element which is a call to joy. I declared here on Easter morning that I had joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. I meant it then, and I still do.

Paradoxically, though, it is helpful to note, and here I am paraphrasing poet Nathaniel Hawthorne, that 'happiness, like a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always beyond our reach. But when we sit down quietly we find that it may come to rest upon us.' Further, it is important to note that Hawthorne speaks of happiness as equivalent to joy. To quote another insightful individual, author and theologian C. S. Lewis writes in his book titled *Surprised by Happiness*, "Happiness is never in our power, and pleasure is. "I doubt," he continues, "whether anyone who has tasted joy would ever, if both were in his [or her] power, exchange it for all the pleasure in the world."

Saul, a citizen at the time of the city of Tarsus, is a Hebrew by birth, a Jew by religion, and a Pharisee by sect. This notion that someone who died a condemned criminal was actually the prophesied Messiah of the Jews is

extremely offensive to him. It is too much for Saul to ponder that his approach and that of his fellow Pharisees could be so errant as to execute, rather than adore, the Savior. It is not too much to suggest that the apostle Peter is experiencing inward struggles very similar to those of Saul. Peter's expectations of the Savior have, like Saul's, not been met in this Jesus of Nazareth.

John writes that this is now the third time Jesus appears to them. The risen Jesus has already appearing mystically yet materially to the disciples twice while they are huddled in secret in the city of Jerusalem. Now Peter and six of the others are at the Sea of Tiberius, i.e. the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. Yet, Peter seems at a loss for what to do about it.

Peter is stuck between joy that Jesus has not succumbed to the apparent permanence of death and an absence of clarity about what he should be doing about it. "Jesus is risen! Hallelujah! Now, I guess," Peter seems to conclude, "let's go back to doing what we used to do and to being whom we used to be." No riding into Jerusalem with an amateur army of the faithful and God's mighty arm clearing them a path. No taking back the city; no reclaiming the nation; no reasserting their power as a people; no restoration of the former political and religious glory of mythological times gone by.

The Savior that Peter might have expected in Jesus has failed to materialize. Relieved? Yes, most likely. But aware that Jesus has disappointed him in a way, and painfully aware that he has disappointed Jesus, Peter returns to the comforts of his former ways.

This may remind Christians today, you and me included, that the big question that the Church is always bound to try to answer is, 'So what?' For you, for me, for the person who learns or who knows that you and I are followers of Jesus, the question is always, 'So what?' What difference does this make to you that you follow Jesus? What difference does this make to me that I follow Jesus? And most important to someone wondering, maybe skeptically, still keeping himself or herself at a safe distance from this organized religion, what difference will it make to them if they should decide to follow Jesus?

For Saul of Tarsus, following Jesus is a violation of everything he understands and believes make for authentic relationship with God. For Saul, it is grace enough that God has given the Law, the Torah, so that people can now figure out how to behave so obediently toward God that God will treat them favorably. This new Christ-ian notion of God's grace that is so gracious, so generous, that, in Saul's mind, it is down-right un godly, needs to be stamped out for the people's own good.

Peter, on the other hand, has been there when Jesus has pronounced God's forgiveness toward tax-collectors who collaborate with the Romans, toward loose women who have given up on their own dignity. And he has heard of, if not witnessed for himself, Jesus inviting God's forgiveness toward the very people who put Jesus himself to death on the cross. If the idea of such a generous grace is inexplicable for Saul, for Peter, such grace is a wonderful idea. It just seems to him to be inapplicable.

Some anonymous wit has offered the observation that a simple formula for joy in life is to "do something every day to make other people happy; even this means only to leave them alone." For Saul, initially anyway, perhaps this is advice that he needs to take. 'For awhile anyway, leave the Christians alone.' Author Victor Hugo once suggested that, "The supreme happiness in life is the conviction that we are loved." For Peter, at this point in his ministry, this is exactly what he needs to know.

Jesus commands Peter, 'Feed my lambs;' 'Tend my sheep;' and 'Feed my sheep.' If there is a progression of sorts here, from feeding the newest, spiritually youngest Christians, to guarding the older more mature ones, finally to taking responsibility for their nurture, it is hard to say with certainty. What is clear is that Jesus matches each of Peter's three denials of him on the night his persecution with a declaration of his trust in Peter, and so, of his love for him.

While not the sensational experience that Saul has with the risen Lord, this is, for Peter, a point in his own path where he moves from the distance of an observer of God's grace to the intimacy and vulnerability of someone who experiences it in a very personal way. For Saul, the

blinding light and a thundering sound of his own experience are finally enough to bring to a grinding halt the personal ambitions, the self-righteous zeal; to stop in his tracks this one for whom, until now, the written words of scripture are all that he has allowed to define the presence of the Living Word of God in the midst of humanity and within his own heart.

Mark Twain once noted that just as grief is cut in half when it is shared with others, so also does joy shared with others, enable us suddenly to find it doubled.

Jesus spends little time with Saul in going over the grievous things that Saul has done. Jesus spends little time if any assuring Peter that he is forgiven those past expressions of his human frailty. Christ's gives greater energy to impressing upon Saul not to a giddy pleasure, but a deeper, higher, joy at meeting in person the risen Christ Jesus and at being called by God to share this joy with the world around him. Jesus instead gives all of his attention, to entrusting to Peter the precious mission of getting out to the world around him the Good News of God's Love for all.

If that road to joy truly is always under construction, then so much the better. For we can rarely build alone what we can build well together. If this grace is hard to explain, yet it is something we can describe personally in turning and having turned from doing former things the old ways, and in being made new again and again by your experience and mine of the Love of God. If the road to joy truly is unfinished, yet as we labor on it together, we find that the road to be completed is shorter than we may first have supposed it to be. We find that its length is no greater than the distance from me to you, from you to her, from her to him. We find that the distance between us and them, whosever they are, is no greater and just the same as the distance between all of us together and God's immeasurable Joy.

Now may Almighty God, who in Christ Jesus brings the promise of life to all the world, grant that we may ever abide in the holiness and liberty of our lives made new; through Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, One God, now and for ever. Amen.