

PENTECOST II 14 June 2020 (Proper 6)

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Parish, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Genesis 18.1-15; Psalm 116.1, 10-17; Romans 5.1-8; Matthew 9.35 - 10.8

Make me aware, O Lord,
Of the eye that beholds me,
The hand that holds me,
The heart that loves me,
The Presence that enfolds me. Amen.

I arrived in Kent six months after cable television service had come to town, and only on Main Street/Route 7, where the rectory is. (It was a 'selling point' for the position of Rector!) This of course meant that most of the town still had only spotty television reception, had limited radio reception, and ... the Internet was not even a gleam in almost anyone's eye. Newspapers --what we now call 'hard copies'-- were a big seller in the little convenience market across Main Street from the rectory, where lawn crews gathered each morning for coffee, and so every morning I walked across the street to pick up *The New York Times*.

And almost every morning, standing near but not quite with the lawn crews, a cup of coffee in his hand, was an older man (I shall call him Bob) in blue jeans, a flannel jacket (great, heavy black rubber boots in mud season), and a well-worn blue and white pinstripe cap --a railroad engineer's cap, I assumed. After a couple of weeks, each morning that I approached the store, he would look over at me, slightly tip his cap, and say, 'Morning, Sir'. And I greeted him back, 'Good morning, Bob'.

A year later, my father suddenly died and I was back in the Midwest for a couple of weeks. On the early December morning when for the first time in a while I again awakened in the rectory back in Kent, I crossed the street to get the newspaper, and as I drew near to Bob, he looked over, a great grin spread across his face, he opened his arms wide and said, 'Where've you been ...? We've missed you!' And suddenly I felt welcome, that Kent was in fact my home.

Three or four years went by, and one morning I realized that I had not seen Bob in front of the market in a few days. And that morning his wife (whom I had never met) called me and said that he had just died, that for a long while he had insisted to her that I was the one who was to bury him. He was not a church goer, she told me, but he had loved Jesus and always tried to do as Jesus said. He did not smoke, she added, and that was a good thing, because he never went to banks, either, and had he ever set fire to his mattress they would have lost a lot of money. This was not much to go on, but I knew at once that I needed to preach at Bob's burial.

The cemetery was up in the hills around town centre, and when I arrived there were gathered about fifty people, most of whom I did not recognize; and so as we waited for Bob's widow to appear I began to introduce myself to various groups, asking each how they knew Bob, hoping that someone would give me a bit more to say about the kind man whom I had begun truly to miss.

I approached a group of a dozen or so African-American men dressed in suits, jackets and ties; and, as I walked over, each of them at once and incongruously put on an immaculately starched blue and white pinstripe engineer's cap just like Bob's, and they were eager to say something.

When each had joined the railroad as teenagers, Bob had been their boss. Some of them had themselves become supervisors, some foremen, a couple had gone into the accounting department, and none had ever lost touch with one another or with Bob. They adored him: he had treated African-Americans with the same good humor that he treated everyone else, taught them their jobs in the same way that he taught young white men. And when any of them had been insulted, derided because of their race, Bob had swiftly stepped in with something like, 'What is your problem ...? God made him. He's good enough for God but not good enough for you ...?'

And I have no doubt that had any of them had been out sick for a day or two, his first words upon their return were, 'Where've you been ...? We've missed you!' They had come to the graveside to honor someone's welcome, and ... someone's Grace ..., routinely and effortlessly bestowed.

On this morning, Matthew's Gospel tells us the story of Jesus' sending out of the newly-named inner circle of his disciples, The Twelve. The authorities that he gives them are astonishing: 'proclaim the good news, The Kingdom [is] near. Heal the sick, raise the dead ..., cast out demons'. And it all sounds ... impossible. Truly impossible.

But ... hear it this way: Make the proximity, the nearness of God obvious; stand up to the forces that bind and oppress the Creatures whom God loves; heal them. (That word 'cure' that we heard is a poor translation because these days it implies a medical 'fix': 'heal' suggests 'make them feel as whole as you can'.) And then there is that preposterous 'raise the dead' --revive what has died, which is so often Hope And, the task of being a disciple sounds a bit more doable

It is still a lot of work, Holy work --indeed, 'Come, Labor On'-- and yet ... it starts out so simply, like any other journey, pilgrimage, with one tiny first step One of the Pharisees, the teachers, asks Jesus which is the greatest of God's commandments, and Jesus responds, 'love ... God with all your heart, ... with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment a second is like it: ... love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets' [*Matthew 22.37-40*].

You see, the first tiny step is, for God's sake ... Love your neighbor as yourself. Then, heal wounds as best you can, remembering that with some wounds you may not always see blood; calm fears, and be the cause of no more terrors; restore hope in the Presence that you can make near to hand.

Today we also hear the story of Sarah's reaction to the news that she --at age ninety-- is to have a son, the beginning of a long-promised progeny. And she laughs with incredulity: 'O, come on ...'. Each of us might likely have given the same response. She doubts that God will, even can, use her for anything so unlikely; and each of us might think, even wish, that God cannot have such mighty purposes in mind for us.

Which is when the memories of people such as Bob come into play O yes I remember He did comfort the afflicted, defended and strengthened the weak; he did revive hope in who they were, might become. He blessed and changed lives. And, Bob himself might have said to Sarah, Well, God maybe used me Could maybe use you, too

I had not thought about Bob in a while, and now perhaps Bob and his ... way of living ... are a bit in your memories, too And that does sound, ever so miraculously, something like raising the dead

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.