

April 19, 2009

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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THE DOORS WERE LOCKED FOR FEAR

I had a conversation with a man this week who was interested in matters of faith. He saw himself as 'spiritual', but is not a follower of anything in particular. He valued his individualism. He might be one of that large number of people who define themselves for polling purposes as 'spiritual but not religious'. He is bright, engaging, not looking for an argument and a genuine seeker after truth. I suggested that this might be a community in which he could do some exploring of matters of faith without feeling compromised, manipulated or treated as an object for conversion. I told him that it was not unusual that we have people in Bible studies and enquirers' classes who do not and have no intention of coming to worship, but also that worship is where he will really learn what we are about. I suggested that what he would find here are individuals in community and that we find community important because community is the bearer of story from generation to generation. I wondered what the story of his spirituality was and whether it was conscious and whether it was chosen and whether it was good.

Our readings today point to the origins of this community. In *John*, we have Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto the disciples and granting them the power of God to bind and loose sins. They are a community that can either remain bound by sin, or can choose to loosen that bondage through the practice of generosity toward one another as God has been generous to them. In *Acts* we see how that community set about living based on the sure and certain knowledge that what they have in their possession in the end belongs to God and so set about practicing not only generosity but also the expectation of sufficiency: the experience that everyone in the community can have enough.

For much of the history of the church these realities have been about power and who has power over whom and whether and how any such power is exercised for good. It has led to the story and practice of excommunication, a privilege rarely used in the Episcopal Church in any formal way these days as we have learned to grasp more fully the costliness of grace and the abundance of God's generosity toward us. The power that is pointed to this day is part of the foundation in Christian ethics for a certain understanding of taxation and the idea that no one in a civilized society should be living on the streets or unable to receive medical care, even as we also recognize the complexities of the freedom of choice that we are granted as part of God's generosity.

If and as we can set aside the challenges of power for the moment, then what we have today are stories of the origins of our community, stories based firmly and clearly in God's generosity toward us. More than that, we have further evidence that the full recognition of such generosity should leave us with some measure of fear. I say, 'further evidence' because last week *Mark* left us with the women at the empty tomb, trembling and afraid. There is something about that first intimation that nothing will ever be the same for us once we begin to realize the enormity of God's love for us. The disciples locked the doors not once, but twice in the days immediately following the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Our tendency to want to hunker down in the face of challenge, batten down the hatches and ride out what ever storms may come in life, locking the doors for fear of whoever would wish us evil, -- that tendency is part of what it means to choose to remain bound in sin rather than loosed by the recognition of God's grace. We see the same tendency to closing doors with the various protectionist policies being floated in face of economic recession, or restrictive and punitive policies with regard to the enormously complex set of issues around immigration. Jesus has to say to Thomas, but in the presence of all of his friends: "Do not doubt, but believe", and John adds that "through believing that Jesus is the Messiah, you may have life in his name."

On the day of our annual parish meeting, I find myself wondering how we will respond to the enormity of God's life-giving generosity to us in years to come. I'm encouraged by our willingness to be flexible in the face of economic challenge that every news outlet calls 'unprecedented' and even as we have to cut important programs so we are willing to be more the church and expand our giving for those whose turn it is to find themselves in a time of need. I'm also aware from some of the conversations that our strategic thinking group have been inviting in recent weeks that we have more work to do in facing the future imaginatively, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the relevance of the Gospel in a world that is changing in relation to our faith. I'm reminded of what Henry Ford said of his invention of the horseless carriage: "If I'd asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said they wanted a faster horse."

We must beware of huddling behind closed doors for fear of what is coming and what will be asked of us, even recognizing that some measure of fear is proper in the face of the generosity of God and what it can mean for our lives as individuals in a community of faith. So I'm back to my conversation with my new friend, the spiritual individualist, --perhaps a good description of most of us, except that God has brought us to find life in and among the community of disciples who remember what it is that God has done for us in Christ and who seek to respond together to the extraordinary generosity of God, not for our sake only, but for the sake of the whole world.

I invite you to consider and remember how God has been generous to you and give thanks. In silence and in response to the Gospel, let us pray...