

May 9, 2010

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:9-15

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Mothering Sunday

I grew up with a little observed festival during Lent called 'Mothering Sunday'. In a village with a fairly 'high' church parish we were taught that we were honoring the Virgin Mary and 'Mother Church'. I did not know that this was one of those Christian 'takeover jobs' like Easter. Easter is named for the feast called *oestre*, a feast of the goddess Astarte or Esther. Mothering Sunday supplanted the Roman *hilaria* festival in honor of a mother goddess called Cybele. Apparently the observance lapsed in much of Europe in the twentieth Century but was revived after American troops observed and celebrated 'Mother's Day' on the Second Sunday in May. Who knew? At any rate, today's observance and its ancient cousins are all about where we are nurtured and by whom.

I dare say that there are some of us here who as children did not enjoy nurturing parents, but many of us would think about home as a place of nurture in our childhoods, and our parents as providers of that nurture. Nurture is being cared for in a way that allows us to thrive. Nurture is sustenance and also appropriate freedom. Nurture is being held tight when we need it but never being suffocated. Nurture is being fed and clothed and schooled but not bribed, manipulated or taught that all of life is a *quid pro quo* or matter of exchange of value. Nurture is bound up with love. Nurture is being reminded that we are of infinite value not because we can produce something, and not because we can consume things and spend money, and not because we are somehow useful. Nurture is being told and taught that we are of infinite value because we are beloved of God, the Love who made us for Love.

We need this kind of nurture as adults as well, but it can be hard to come by. Where do you get cared for in a way that allows you to thrive?

The Christians in Macedonia needed to be cared for as Paul grasped in a vision. But it turns out that even apostles need to be supported if they are to thrive. Paul and his companions stayed in Philippi for a few days. It was a fairly significant Roman colony and people prized their citizenship. One day they went to look for a place of prayer, itself a kind of nurture on occasion, and found a gathering of women. One of them was from Thyatira, now in Turkey and a center of carpet making. She appears to be a homeowner and she is a 'dealer in purple cloth'. Purple cloth was prized because it was so expensive. And it was expensive because purple dye was so hard to make. Roman Senators had purple on their togas. Purple became a sign of authority and status. (And there you have the origin of the practice of our bishops wearing purple shirts. One marvelous piece

of nurture and advice I received from my father when I told him that I was planning to seek ordination was ‘for heaven’s sake, don’t get caught up in a young man’s haze of prelate’s purple’.) Lydia listened to Paul and was baptized, as was the custom of the day, “with her household”. Apparently the gospel was nurture to her, a story of hope and purpose. In time she prevailed up on Paul and his team to stay with her, which they did. She gave them a place to rest and Christian company in this Roman city.

And here is the clue: nurture for adults is a *communal* matter. We are able to thrive as we give and receive in places and with people that are fundamentally about love. We are nurtured when we know that we are valued and appreciated for who we are and not for some other purpose.

This is why the only goal of Christian evangelism is about sharing the extraordinary story of God’s love and the ways in which we have glimpsed or experienced the truth of that story. It is about sharing ourselves, bearing witness to good news and so on. It is never about ‘growing the church’, ‘increasing the budget’ or anything else which turns the extraordinary miracle of humanity in all its glory into objects that can be traded upon. You know when you are being used or played, and however much it feels like nurture, you know that it is not. It is lovely to go to a good restaurant and be waited on and not have to do the dishes, and there may even be occasions where that meal is part of real nurture-- probably because someone who loves you is in your company and is even treating you to the experience. But the basis of all that service is profit. Nurture is what is founded in love. Looking for love in all the wrong places is one of the bases for many addictions. No, as adults we give and receive nurture where love is present and perhaps primary. Lydia received good news and shared her gifts and resources as a matter of human fellow-feeling, a matter of Christian community in a sense.

Today we are proclaiming the good news of God’s love for these beautiful children whose first step in their life of faith we mark in baptism. We are also reminding their parents and godparents that they too may give and receive nurture in the community of faith, even as they promise to make that community manifest in the lives of those they present. Christian life will not always be easy, but it is really pretty simple at the heart of the matter. It is about sharing what we have--ourselves--and discovering anew every morning that the meaning of life is found in giving and receiving love. Teach your children well, and you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven, the nurturing love of God in which we thrive.

With this in mind, the candidates for holy baptism will now be presented...