

May 2, 2010

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Victims and Victimization

Observers of the trials and tribulations of the complex issues of Israel, Palestine and the larger Middle East will sometimes note that one factor in making a towards peace so difficult to find is that everyone in the picture is committed to seeing themselves and portraying themselves as *victims*. Israel is a tiny nation state surrounded by peoples who have made clear their desire to obliterate Israel from the face of the earth. The Palestinians are a minority within Israel who say they are being victimized by a State they believe illegitimate. This claim to 'victimhood' is meant to elicit sympathy and support on the world stage for one political agenda or another. We have reached a place where victims believe that they have moral claims on the compassion, aid assistance, and support of others; and so the 'poor me' card gets played by all kinds of people who are far from being victims. We've all met people who have plenty of resources and plenty of power who like to insist that they are victims--often when a political process that they feel entitled to control doesn't go their way. We are witness to a phenomenon in Church and State that appears quite un-American in some ways whereby the political process is only legitimate as long as the angry minority gets what they want.

One tactic for pursuit of minority goals is to focus on purity--theological or political. Advertisements from Churches seeking rectors will sometimes say that they want someone who is 'traditional and believes The Thirty-Nine Articles.' (Have you read them recently? They are among the historical documents section of our *Book of Common Prayer*.) We see Governor Crist of Florida deciding to run as an independent because he is not pure enough for the Republican faithful in that State. We hear an appeal to the victim mentality in all of us calling us to take back power from those we blame for our plight, to get mad, to resist outcomes we don't like in any way possible, and frequently in our desire to blame others and turn things around through purity of message, we end up creating real victims in the process.

There are other ways to work on our attitudes when we feel hard done by in life. A journalist called Ben Sherwood has written a remarkable book called *The Survivor's Club*¹ in which he counsels taking challenges in life one step at a time, remembering that however isolating a crisis can feel there is a kind of universality in suffering; that nothing can substitute for finding purpose and that crisis is not the time to waste breath complaining or waste time sitting still. Those of us who look to Jesus' death on a cross know quite a bit about remembering what is really important in life and discovering that we have been practicing for crisis when our term comes. We need no more have the attitude of a victim that did Jesus, and certainly not in the cause of manipulating others to do our will or share our point of view.

That said, there really are victims in this world. The other side of the gospel that calls us beyond our regressive tendencies to claim 'victim status' when we feel that life has been unfair is the proclamation and reminder that victimizing others is never OK. In John's *Gospel* we hear a lot about "the Jews". *As I said to the Jews so now I say to you 'Where I am going you cannot come.'* This saying and a hundred others like it have given Christians over the centuries a sense of being justified in the persecution of Jews when all that was really going on is that Christians having a hard time in life created scapegoats and victims. This is as indisputable as the reality by which events conspired to make a real victim out of Jesus. When we hear talk of 'the Jews' in John we do well to remember that what is being reflected is the separation of the followers of the way, later to be known as 'Christians', from the rest of the synagogues. Families were set against each other in the same way that we hear in other gospels of mothers being against mother in laws and fathers set against sons and so on. Boundaries and norms were being established or perhaps changed and followers of The Way were clearly being set over and against what we should hear as "The Judaizing Party" rather than 'the Jews'. It is so easy to demonize the enemy and turn them into real victims if we are not careful.

Peter's vision at Joppa serves as a clear corrective to this tendency. He moved away from purity religion which is always setting itself over against that which it believes impure. Peter says clearly that nothing God has made is profane and so to be despised. He set a foundation for our declining to participate in the creation of victims by proclaiming everything that God has made 'clean'. No longer may purity of religion, purity of doctrine, purity of religious practice, 'our' purity in relation to 'them';--no longer may those boundaries be the basis for despising and so victimizing others.

So where we are left is recognizing that there are clearly victims in this world, and that wherever possible some kind of redress is in order. At the same time we decline to give any particular moral rectitude or status of 'righteousness' to those who claim to be, and might in fact be, victims. We remember this in particular

¹ Ben Sherwood, *The Survivor's Club: The Secrets and Science that could Save your Life* (Grand Central Publishing, 2009)

when we are tempted to get others to do our bidding, make things alright for us, or give us what we want. We remember that even if we feel aggrieved, betrayed by life, out of sorts, the victim of some circumstance we judge unfair--we remember that our meaning and purpose comes from deciding that we will not be victimized, oppressed and put down--remembering that we choose not to participate in a world that will keep setting boundaries and declaring others unclean so that we can bolster our own group, our own opinion or our own way of life over against others. God offers a better way; Jesus' way in the face of the cross.

As ever we have a time of silence to continue our response to the gospel in prayer...