

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 9, 2010 C

Acts 16:9-15  
John 14:23-29

The stories found in the Acts of the Apostles play a prominent role in our lectionary readings during these Great Fifty Days of Easter. Many of these stories, like the one we hear today of how Paul and his companions serendipitously meet a group of women sitting on the banks of a river on a Sabbath morning, are stories about evangelization. It's what I'd like to talk about this morning. And I'd like to start with two quick stories as a starting point for looking at 'evangelization' as a way of being rather than doing when it comes to knowing Christ and making him known.

The first story comes from this past Tuesday's meeting of local ministers. We're an ecumenical bunch - Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians, who get together each month for lunch. It's real informal with no agenda. We sort of 'go with the flow' and talk about all sorts of things. This month, for some reason, some ministers started sharing stories of being surprised by people ringing their doorbells to ask if they have accepted Jesus into their lives. It led to a conversation about evangelization. My only contribution to the conversation was to say that if someone ever rings their doorbell to evangelize them and they tell you that they are Episcopalian, call the police immediately! It's just not in our Episcopalian DNA to actively proselytize, especially door to door! But it doesn't mean we're not serious when it comes to evangelization in its true meaning. The second story comes from this past Wednesday night's supper and a brief conversation I had with John Palmer who runs our St. Paul's co-ed softball team which plays in the Greenville church league. We seem to be a church noted for having more than a few players who aren't formal members of our parish and, I suspect, if we had more losses than wins, it might not even be noticed. But it is. And John gets asked questions a lot about how many of our players actually belong to our church. He even had a member of another church ask last year if I approved of our team. As John knows, I have often said that our softball team is one of the best evangelization programs we have at St. Paul's. People think I'm kidding, but I'm not. John has a way of attracting students through his work at ECU who, in many instances, don't have any church affiliation. They come to know Christ through the hospitality and welcoming spirit extended to them through John and the members of the team who are part of our parish family. We don't have special rules for non-members, like 'you've got to go to at least two Sunday services a month at St. Paul's during softball season if you want to play.' (Heck, we can't create those rules for our regular members!!) We simply welcome them and invite them to participate, as we welcome today those who come here for the first time, knowing that there are no strangers, just friends through Christ we haven't met.

When I think of evangelization, I think of St. Francis of Assisi, who is known for the saying, "Preach and when necessary use words." He was a thirteenth century evangelist, a herald of the good news of God's love in Christ, who witnessed to the reality that evangelization is about being and becoming the good news of Jesus for others. It's really about establishing genuine relationships through which the love of God in Christ is visible in our actions. It's not about trying to convert or 'save' people. That's God's job. Our job is to respond to the gift of faith we've been given by seeking a deeper, more authentic relationship with God through Christ, which gets us to today's gospel, where Jesus speaks the language of presence. "We" will "make our home" with you. We will live in you through the indwelling gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Not an easy thing to grasp, but then again we're talking here about a mystery to be lived by being attentive to an invisible but real presence within and among us.

John the Evangelist puts today's gospel in the context of the farewell address of Jesus the night before he dies. His death was to be a time of new beginnings for his disciples. His presence as their Risen Lord would be with them through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Though invisible to our human eyes, the Holy Spirit is real and continually surprises us in unexpected ways, especially when we consciously open our minds and hearts to the gift of this indwelling presence. But it takes practice and discipline, as well as intentional silence and inward listening. It takes patience and prayer, but not just the saying or reciting of prayers. It takes the kind of prayer that trusts that something is happening, that the Spirit is working within our trust and our willingness to be open. Brian Taylor puts it this way in his book on contemplative prayer entitled *Becoming Christ: Transformation Through Contemplation*: "...to really trust in this kind of prayer, we must come to the point where we know that prayer is God's work in us even more than it is our work. We come to prayer, invite God's presence, open our hearts, and cooperate with God's action through our willingness to be present. The rest is up to God...Prayer, after all, is so much more than our effort; it is so much more than us and our experience. Prayer is also the divine presence of the living God." Sometimes our job is to simply be available and to wait for the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into relationships and networks through which God works through us without us setting unnecessary boundaries.

A good example of this is our relationship with our neighbors next door at University Towers. We've come a long way since the parish sold the property to the City of Greenville for a dollar, in order to build a public housing complex. We've had a growing relationship through the years and, in the past few years, thanks to Ann Harrison's initiative, we have several social events a year which bring us together as neighbors for dessert, story-telling and the singing of hymns led by the Rev. West Shields. It's a spirit-filled time for building and strengthening relationships with one another. And so, when James Smith, our weekend sexton, stopped in my office this week to say that Rev. Shield's died, it felt as if we had lost one of the members of our

parish family. It's partly why our sanctuary will become for a time tomorrow, the home of St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church for his funeral. The Rev. Shield's son, William, had asked me if his father's funeral can be held here at St. Paul's in order to make it possible for the residents of University Towers to attend. I was honored to say 'yes' - and I suspect the Rev. Shields will be smiling from heaven upon us as we gather together to give thanks to God for the gift of his life and ministry.

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes possible what we otherwise might not be able to do without the Spirit of Jesus leading and guiding us. What Paul and his companions realized in their many journeys and adventures, such as the one we hear today; what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples at the Last Supper of how he would continue to be present to them through the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in his name, is best described for me in the words of St. Teresa of Avila when she wrote the following in the fourteenth century:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
No hands but yours,  
No feet but yours,  
Yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ's compassion to the world;  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now.*

Preach the awesome love of God in Christ. Be attentive to the indwelling presence and transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Be open to the relationships and places to which the Spirit leads. And when necessary - when necessary, use words!

Amen.