

“THE CHURCH ABIDES!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 16, 2021

In our scripture lesson from the Book of Acts of the Apostles this morning, the story, leading up to Pentecost next Sunday, continues. It's the story of faith, courage, and struggle as Jesus' first apostles and disciples came to terms with his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension and founded a church in their beloved teacher's name. It's an inspiring story so important for us to remember and cherish. Why? Because it's up to every generation and age, including our own, to found or rebuild the church of Jesus Christ anew. There's a lot to be learned from what those who have come before us, knowing what they have faced and overcome in faith.

Congregation, as we have talked about throughout this seven week Easter season, Christ's apostles and disciples were initially beset by an overwhelming sense of tragedy as they saw their leader so brutally put to death. Today, to borrow the words of a great church hymn, the cross may possess a “wondrous attraction” for us. It has even become a beautiful artifact of faith, which we wear and display with both reverence and almost aesthetic delight. But the cross in ancient days was a terrible way to die. Not only because of its sheer cruelty through pain imposed, in which the crucified suffocated under the hanging weight of their body, but also due to the shame and disgrace so deeply associated with it. Indeed, the cross was usually reserved for the worst criminals--the baddest of the bad. And the powers that be put Jesus right in that category. All the stigma of it attached to Jesus' followers too.

Yet, as we've also been talking about during our Easter season weeks, the grief, shame, and embarrassment surrounding Christ's crucifixion began to shift to elation after the discovery of the empty tomb and a growing understanding of what that astonishing emptiness meant. Helpful were all the appearances of the risen Christ—first to Mary Magdalene and then to other apostles and disciples, and, finally, a whole cloud or crowd of witnesses, just before his heavenly ascension which the Christian Church historically observes and celebrates this coming Thursday as “Ascension Day.” (*John 20:1-18; Acts 1:1-11*)

At the same time elation was tempered by sobering realities. Jesus' departure left a huge hole. With Christ gone—resurrected and heavenly ascended—what would come next? How would the community of believers that Jesus created persist and endure? During his last supper with his apostles, Jesus had prophesized and promised them the coming of the Holy Spirit. (*John 14:25-26*) Yet how might they hang together in the meantime as they awaited that spirit? Also, what did they as Jesus' followers need to put in place to best prepare and equip themselves to receive the Holy Spirit so that it didn't dissipate on arrival? That would be another form of D.O.A., wouldn't it?

Adding to the challenge for these early Christians, who then called themselves “Followers of the Way,” was the fact the Roman and Jewish authorities alike were still breathing down their necks. Anyone who declared allegiance to Jesus was considered to be a political subversive—i.e., a rabble-rousing political threat which need to be squashed and suppressed. The lives of the apostles and disciples were on the line. The prospect of arrest, imprisonment, and execution was very real for all of them.

Fortunately, the Apostle Peter, who in the past had demonstrated his own moments of weakness to the point of disavowing Christ three times over, rose to the occasion this time around. (*Mark 14:66-72*) Although the Book of Acts is not explicit on this point, it seems Peter was the one who brought his fellow apostles and disciples together for guiding prayer. (*Acts 1:12-13*) His name certainly heads the list of those who met in the upstairs Jerusalem room in order to confer and solicit God’s counsel. As I talked about last Sunday this prayer group includes a number of women, including Jesus’ own mother. (*Acts 1:14*) Thereafter, Peter also calls together a group of 120 disciples to make plans for the future of their community. (*Acts 1:15*) The meeting is one part testimonial time and another part strategy session. Wisely, Peter sets out to reassure everyone that their shared devotion to Christ is not in vain. (*Acts 1:15-20*) Not only was Jesus’ crucifixion a part of a divine plan. So was Judas’ traitorous defection and betrayal of Jesus to the Roman and Jewish authorities. After all, Peter reasons, hadn’t Jesus predicted his own death? And wasn’t it Jesus who had called Judas to apostleship to work alongside the rest of them? Displaying his own knowledge of biblical scripture, Peter further cites to the large gathering passages from Psalms 69 and 109 where both the betrayal and death of Judas appear to be completely prophesized. (*Psalms 69:25, 109:8*)

Showing great leadership, Peter then superintends the selection of a replacement apostle for Judas. Besides laying out the faithful qualifications for any candidate, Peter proposes an impartial lottery, which would, as he saw it, ultimately everything in God’s hands. It works! The new apostle, Matthias, is confirmed without division or polarization within the Christian community. (*Acts 1:21-26*) The gap in the ranks of the original Twelve Apostles, symbolically recalling the Twelve Tribes of Israel, is thus closed, even though at least two more apostles are later added to their number.

Unfortunately, as capable in leadership as Peter reveals himself to be as the entire church awaits the promised coming of the Holy Spirit, his role as the new church’s head does not go unchallenged. Out of nowhere, so-to-speak, the Apostle James, who is hardly mentioned earlier and may not even have been one of the original twelve apostles, suddenly emerges as a counterweight to the Apostle Peter. Although the exact timing is not known, James, perhaps trading on his direct kinship ties as Jesus’ half-brother, wrests

the leadership mantle of the fledgling Jerusalem church from Peter. The one whom Jesus called “the Rock” is figuratively rolled aside. (*Matthew 16:18-20*)

Unlike Peter who, faithful to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is surprisingly broad-minded, James proves to be very rigid in his outlook. As he increasingly comes to dominate the leadership of the Jerusalem church both before and after Pentecost, he is determined to keep the new church morally pure and righteous. For the sake of respectability in the aftermath of the cross’s embarrassment, James conceives of the church community as just another sect of historical Judaism—and wants to keep it that way. Strange as it might sound to us now, James’s Jerusalem church is for Jews only, even to the point of out-Phariseeing the Pharisees with whom his own brother Jesus repeatedly wrangled. In contrast to Peter and, subsequently, the still-newer Apostle Paul, James opposes the conversion of Gentiles or non-Jews to the way of Christ unless men are circumcised and their families adopt all the dietary restrictions that are part and parcel of keeping the laws of the Torah. In other words, as James sees it, one has to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. As James continues to worship at the Great Jerusalem of Temple, he is viewed by traditional Jews as a borderline heretic but nevertheless admired for his strenuous Jewish piety, which virtually out-Pharisees the Pharisees whom his own brother Jesus repeatedly criticized for their legalism.

Under the circumstances, how can the Apostle Peter feel anything but displaced? His alienation from the path that James has laid for Christ’s church is only deepened after he experiences a divinely-inspired vision of Jews and non-Jews freely eating together without any dietary restrictions to keep them apart. (*Acts 10:1-48*) Peter also soon finds himself highly sympathetic to the ministry of Paul of Tarsus who feels called by God and Christ to embark on a ministry to the Gentiles or non-Jews across the entire eastern Mediterranean region, fully welcoming them into the membership of the church. (*Acts 11:1-18; 15:1-35*)

Significantly, in 44 *anno domini*, in the Year of Our Lord, the Apostle Peter departs from Jerusalem forever. It’s been speculated that Peter’s exit may have been prompted by a persecution of Christians which engulfed the Jerusalem church that year. (*Acts 12:1-19*) In a failure of James’ strategy of keeping the church safe by keeping it as Jewish as possible, Peter is among those imprisoned at the command of the Roman-appointed king, Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great who ruled near the time of Jesus’ birth. After an extraordinary, providential jailbreak, described in the Book of Acts, Peter would certainly have every reason to get out of Jerusalem for good. (*Acts 12:6-12*) Yet at the same time it’s also possible that the now liberated Peter feels called by God to move on elsewhere because of his more inclusive vision of what the church should be. In fact, what follows for Peter are two decades of successful missionizing on behalf of the church in lands far beyond Jerusalem and Israel. Along with the Apostle Paul, Peter is

responsible for spreading the faith of Christ of the four corners of the world then known to Jews and Gentiles alike. Somewhere between 54 and 58 A.D., Peter settles in Rome and is soon leading the mixed Jewish and Gentile Christian Church that has already been founded there.

Ironically, in Jerusalem James, despite all his piety and efforts to accommodate traditional Judaism, is also arrested, then put to death. Some say this happens as early as the King Herod Agrippa's persecution of Jerusalem Christians in 44 A.D. (*Acts 12:1-2*) Other historians contend that James' death came later in 62 A.D. However, everyone agrees that the Jerusalem Church which James headed as its first bishop was utterly destroyed in 70 A.D. when the Romans moved into the city to suppress a major Jewish revolt. Fulfilling a previous prophecy of Jesus, the entire City of Jerusalem with its magnificent temple where James and other Christians from his fold had kept worshipping was leveled. Nothing was left except for the so-called "wailing wall" which survives to this day. (*Mark 13:1-2*) Jews and Christians were massacred or otherwise driven away.

Ultimately, if it had not been for the outreach to the gentiles in the name of Christ advocated and pursued by both the Apostles Peter and Paul, Christ's Church would have died then and forever. Indeed, if Peter and Paul had not actively Christianized non-Jews, whom James held at arm's length, the church as we know and still cherish today wouldn't exist.

Sadly, Peter didn't live to see the full fruits of all his successful, daring missionary leadership. Between 64 and 68 A.D. he too is arrested, imprisoned, and executed. It takes place during the reign and persecution of the notorious Emperor Nero who, legend says, fiddled while Rome burned—a fire he set and blamed on the Christians. However, this time, according to an account preserved by the church he loves, Peter sets a rare example of courage. First fleeing the fire and persecution of Nero's Rome, he purportedly turns back after a mystical encounter with Christ who asks him where he going. Not wanting to fail or disavow Christ again, Peter returns to Rome to face martyrdom in the company of fellow stalwart Christians. In a poignant twist, reflecting the humility he learned at the Last Supper when Jesus insisted on washing his feet, Peter requests that the Romans who arrest him crucify him upside down. (*John 13:1-20*) He does not want his own crucifixion to visually compete in any way with Jesus' supreme anguish and sacrifice at Calvary. Ancient church legend says that the Romans honored Peter's unusual request.

Of course, the Christian church also came to honor Peter, far more than James. Peter came to be regarded as the first Bishop of Rome and the first pope of a universal church. Along with the Apostle Paul, who shared in a more inclusive vision of all God's

people, Peter is even today regarded by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians alike, and as the Christian church's as a truly great leader.

In this last week of the Easter season we are reminded through the testimony of scripture and the enduring legends of church history that the Christian church has faced many struggles. Especially in its earliest days, there have been many moments when it seemed highly unlikely and improbable that the church of Jesus Christ could ever survive. Yet time and again, despite devastating setbacks, the Christian churches has emerged from these troubles resilient. Betrayals and failures have been overcome. Leadership vacuums have been filled. Misguided leadership has been corrected with new pathways opened.

Certainly key to the survival of the Christian church has been truth and wisdom of scripture. The prayers of God's people in every time and place have also been important. Yet no less critical has been the openness of Christian men and women to the fresh call of God through the Holy Spirit which we honor always but are going to especially celebrate next Sunday. That spirit can lead us to do new and unexpected things which ensure both our spiritual well-being and a healthy future for the church as the living body of Christ.

In recent years there has been a turn across our nation towards hyper-individualism. This has given rise to skepticism about all institutions, community organizations, and so-called organized religion. Rampant materialism has also beat out serious attention on the part of many more to the way of faith—specifically, our Christian faith. Being a good consumer has come matter more than being a good Christian. Sad to say, in the face of these trends some churches have felt obliged to turn themselves into entertainment venues to engage the attention of more people. In a world where the medium so often the message this has compromised any serious or deeper Christian witness, trivializing what the Christian life is all about.

Meanwhile, as we all know the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a further blow to churches. Congregations of all sizes have had shut down or severely restricted our ministries. All this has compounded the Christian church's woes. It has certainly raised questions, even doubts, about what will happen when our churches start opening up more widely as the pandemic retreats. Will the Christian church survive as anything more than a shallow shadow of its former self? The question is serious.

However, here we can take hope from the history of the church and the experience of our forebearers in faith. We need to remember that God is in the miracle and resurrection business. As the earliest Christians in the days of the Apostles Peter and Paul discovered, our Father has a wonderful way of bringing those faithful to him through all worldly trials and travails to a dryer shore and higher ground. Perhaps it's instructive for us even today that the Jerusalem Church headed by Jesus' own half-brother, which

was so rigid and close-minded about what God wanted the church to be, was swept away. At the same time, the more inclusive Christian church conceived by a more broad-minded apostles Peter and Paul not only survived but came to thrive. It was more open to the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ and the working of God's grace. Indeed, the Christian community welcoming Jews and Gentiles alike which Peter and Paul helped shape and lead became the the foundation for the church that prevailed for the next two thousand years, which not even the most brutal persecution could kill.

This coming week, as we get poised to celebrate another Pentecost and the presence of the Holy Spirit, may we trust that God will continue to help his people and his true church abide. How important that we open ourselves as the church to the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit through the discipline of prayer and the study and contemplation of scripture that will help us recognize how God is doing his new thing in our midst to assure our well-being and bring fresh life to the body of Christ on earth. If we are faithful and courageous as our Christian forebearers have been, the Christian will survive and thrive until that final day of glad reunion when heaven and earth are one or we are each called to join with Jesus and the saints in their realm above.

Amen.