

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Third Sunday of Easter / April 30, 2017

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In the Acts of the Apostles we begin to get in touch with the original passion of the early church before there was an institution. I am struck by the crowd's question, "Brothers, what should we do?" It was spoken first in the Psalm, "How shall I repay the Lord for all the good things he has done for me?" I was talking with an older parishioner. She had sung in the choir for twenty-four years. She recalled her mother saying, "The Lord gave you a good voice. Give it back." I wonder if it is not too much to say, that volunteering (giving back) is the original drive of Peter's church.

We had a volunteer recognition dinner last night. It is clear that volunteers have heart. This has been true from the church's beginning. The crowd gathered before Peter is "cut to the heart." It is a kind of "open-heart surgery" that lets the gospel touch the pulse of life. In the First Letter of Peter we are urged to "love one another deeply from the heart." And two of the first followers of Jesus felt their hearts burning within them as the risen Christ overtook them and interpreted scripture in such a way that their shaken lives made sense.

Years ago there was a Godly Play teacher who travelled the world for her company. We were sitting around and she recounted flying back from Japan reading and learning the Godly Play story she would tell the children on Sunday. Someone asked her, "Why do you do that?" You have an important job. You travel the world. Why do you take time for Godly Play? In answer she began to tear up. You could see how the question had gone right to her heart. She said how the stories for children had actually deepened her own faith. Like Cleopas and his friend the stories opened the scriptures to her and warmed her heart. Maybe they grounded her so that she was not blinded by

her own success and self-importance. At any rate her eyes welled up. She had heart. She was a volunteer.

What gets in the way of this passion? How do we become half-hearted? It is not hard to get caught up in the illusion that we are (or ought to be) self-sufficient; that we are beholden to no one, and owe nothing to anyone. This is blindness. Sometimes we are blinded by sadness and grief. We just walk to whatever Emmaus takes us away from the risk of any more hurt. We withdraw. We may feel as though we have nothing to offer. This is another blindness. We lose heart. At other times we are blinded by cynicism. We want a Jesus that is predictable, maybe a Jesus that stays dead. We want to be in control, not let our defenses down, not let Jesus get under our skin, not let him get too close to our heart. We are half-hearted. And hide it behind a sophisticated veneer. We don't want to take a metaphorical elevator ride down to the level of our need or another's. We want to keep our distance from loss that saddens us, from vulnerability, even from love.

And then Jesus overtakes us. We may not recognize Christ at first. It may be we are looking for someone else. In order to see, we have to let go of our expectations. Much of what we have been led to believe has proven limited or false. What endures is the Word of God. The word of God in song and the word of God in story help to clear up our sight. It's the bible and the breaking of bread that help us to look up from sadness. "Open the eyes of our faith," we pray.

Then cut to the heart, we ask: "What should we do?" "Repent," Peter says. Give up the pretense of perfect control. Risk being vulnerable. Join the human condition. Then you will find love. Then the Holy Spirit will be poured out on you, and not only that, you will be capable of receiving it. With the Spirit comes gifts. Everyone has gifts according to the grace that God has given. So what should we do? Give of our gifts. Give them back. Give them from the heart.

Giving back from the gifts we are given may be the original passion of the early church. The gospel is full of this energy and movement. We are on the road, as the gospel says. It is the path in which we give of ourselves in love

for the life and well being of others. Jesus has come alongside us. His Spirit has been poured out on us. "Give it back," a mother tells her daughter of the gift she has been given. An executive finds her own deep faith by offering bible stories to children. This is what we call volunteering today. It is what fired up the early church. People want to be part of that spirit. "Three thousand persons were added" to the community, it says in the Acts of the Apostles. No one is going to join a cynical, half-hearted, half blind church, or any other organization for that matter. Instead, let us be overtaken by Jesus. "Open the eyes of our faith," we pray. Watch what happens when our hearts are full! The Spirit has bestowed on us gifts. Give them back. Giving only takes us deeper into our faith. That's what other people are looking for. Thank you volunteers! Giving for others with a full heart was the original energy of the church and it is the enduring power of Jesus' community today.

*Amen.*