

The Fifth Sunday after Easter

James 1:22ff

John 16:23-33

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Today, by most any contemporary measure, is likely seen as archaic or at least a rare curiosity. It is known to those of you who, for decades, have been hanging around Anglican circles as Rogation Sunday. It was quietly slipped out of sight when the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was developed, and even though it is in our edition (1928), the practices to which it refers were already long out of memory and practice for many. The name for this day derives from the Latin, Rogare, which means to ask or plead for, reflecting the Gospel for today where Jesus invites us to make our requests to God. “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give you”, sets the tone. From a too simple or shallow hearing that is quite a statement. Of course, we have to be quite careful in reading, understanding, and applying that text!! This isn’t a candy machine where the dollar goes in and the sugar-laden calories are dispensed. I tried that one year in a math class even having the audacity to ask for an A, of course without an ounce of studying. God answered by allowing me to get a F and reminding me that I was not only foolish but lazy as well!

In Hebraic thought, and even today, to ask in someone’s name is to request in a way that honors their integrity, submits to their will and desires, and in this case, what is good for all and not just for one. (It is a text that might well be worth hearing these days by those who wish to exercise their freedom at the expense of the well-being of others!) The invitation to speak to God as friends and as beloved, and to live in that dialogue and with the fruit of it is the focus of this day-rogare-ask!!

There is also another important historical aspect that is worthy of our considering when we come to this Sunday. Starting somewhere around 450 A.D. the practice of ‘Beating the Bounds’ came to be an important way people asked and pleaded for God’s care. In a day where GPS is the gold standard for deciding where we are, the destination at which we hope to arrive, and the pathway to get there, this behavior is going to seem absurd. But consider a time when few people read, spent an entire lifetime never traveling more than 40 miles from their birthplace, and had no means of communication beyond spoken words or church bells ringing. That will give you a context for this activity. The priest of the parish where people lived would walk the boundaries and drive ash and birch stakes in the ground, all the while blessing this wonderful plot of land. In places this continues, but not for geographical orientation. Yes, it did that, but far more it gave people a sense of PLACE; that is, it gave the people rootedness, connection, and home. If they were connected to the land, then they were connected to what it provided and produced, to their role in that creativity, to their stewardship and attention to its needs and strengths, to their own dependency on God for sustenance, and to their neighbor for whom they had a responsibility and from whom they received the blessings of community. Is it any mystery or wonder that people ‘beat the bounds’, and with clarity of heart asked/pleaded/prayed for the gift of God’s creative presence? How else would they travel with courage and heart through a world where trouble, strife, greed, and tribulation appeared to hold sway? I recall the times of walking the farm with my father, grandfather, uncles, and cousins; a farm which has been in our family since the days of the American revolution. We viewed the fields where livestock and food was produced; the springs where water was cold enough to keep perishable goods; woods that produced wood for building and fire; and it was a place of history where we belonged and came to know who we are. It was a sort of beating the bounds. As with many an outmoded practice, there is often an underlying power that keeps us participating in them.

This is reflected in the early 1630's by the Reverend George Herbert, Rector of the parish church in Bemerton, England just outside Salisbury. Herbert was a wonderful Anglican priest and divine, who wrote poetry and is best known for "A Priest to The Temple". It is a fascinating collection of reflections about the spiritual life lived out as a parson within the Church. He even arranged the words on occasion on the page in the form of the subject he was addressing—so with Easter Wings the script forms wings. Herbert reflects that this beating the bounds is long outdated, yet he maintains it for it brings distinct advantages, and there are four that are still significant centuries later.

The first is precisely to ask for a blessing. Children at the Eucharist, a penitent upon confession, a couple saying lifelong vows, a dying person moving beyond this life all seek to be blest. It is not simply getting something we want, but is asking that our lives, sustained by God's love and grace, will be marked by dependence on that relationship, and that we will continue in it for the days we have before us. Whatever you ask the Father in my Name, He will give you"... Why, out of love. And recall that love always seeks the ultimate good of the other, so that granting requests made selfishly or for absorbed purposes is not possible for God, because it is not for our well-being. To be blest is to receive an affirmation of living day in and day out, even as children ask for the blessing of their parents in taking a new venture. It is an act that forms our hearts and directs them toward what is good.

Second, Herbert reflects that the practice had to do with justice. That is making sure that proper division of goods was followed and that no undue advantage was taken over others. We rely on laws and courts and hearings to keep ourselves 'in line', but true justice derives from the owner of the fields—God the Father—and His desire that justice—(righteousness) be done. And here is truth; real justice arises from within us and not merely from books of law. To love justice is to love the one who brings it to us, and in fact gives it to us every day in what we call GRACE.

Third, and I find this particularly powerful, he says that celebrating this practice leads people to 'walk lovingly and neighborly together'. Why do we find it so difficult in these days of isolation and stay at home orders? It is not merely the sense of restricted freedom, but the loss of our communion with one another in embodied form. There is something good and holy about fellowship in a world that has become more and more separated by ideology, political and otherwise, and in the dependence on technology as a substitute for person to person connectedness. Nearly every day I get a ping on my telephone telling me that there is a 'friend invitation' on Facebook. My how I would hate to depend on that for my soul's nourishment!!! (Especially since I only check it about two or three times a year.). The deepest places and needs in us can only be met in the deepest communion. Perhaps this is why earlier in the Farewell Discourse Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you slaves, but friends" just after telling them the greatest love is his laying down his life.

Finally, Herbert suggests that Rogation (asking) is about giving. His written phrase is, "Relieving the poor by a liberal distribution and largess." What has become striking in this pandemic is that there is no shortage of food or the world's goods (except toilet paper), only a shortage of the will to distribute it to those who live on the edges and are without.

Yes, it is an outmoded practice in a non-agrarian world, but just maybe it shouldn't be cast aside, but allowed to make us a little more likely to ask God's care, a little more willing to seek justice, a little more open to welcoming others into ourselves, and a bit more likely to give. As the collect

SERMON – FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER – 17 MAY 2019

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

---

for today offers: "O Lord, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen>