

Sermon

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

June 17, 2018

Liz DeNauw, Postulate for the Priesthood

Some of you know that I have recently returned from a vacation in Greece. While i was there, I had the opportunity to visit a Greek Orthodox Church on the island of Tinos. This church is known as Panagia Evangelistria, or “ Our Lady of Good Tidings.” The church building is constructed of white marble and yellow stucco and dates from the 1800’s. The story goes that a nun by the name of Sister Pelagia received a series of three visions of the Virgin Mary telling her that she was tired of being hidden. She gave the sister directions as to where to dig in a nearby field. After extensive digging, one workmen came across a buried icon of the Annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel. This was found inside of the ruins of an ancient Byzantine church dedicated to John the Baptist. It was felt that this was probably buried to protect it from being stolen by the Ottomans who at that time ruled Greece. The popular belief is that the icon was produced by the apostle Luke, although there is no way to confirm that with certainty. The icon is felt to be much older than the Byzantine church where it was found however. Many miracles where ascribed to this icon, with the most significant being the defeat of the Ottomans by the Greeks and the establishment of the independent Greek state in 1823. Because of this, the church was built over the site where the icon was discovered.

This church is now recognized as one of the most holy sites in Greece. This icon is still displayed in the church and is paraded around the town on several feast days. There is a massive celebration on August 15, which is the feast of the Assumption . Many pilgrims come daily to venerate the icon and to pray for intercession. It has now become so encrusted by jewels and decoration that it is difficult to see the original image, but has become more precious to believers over the years.

While I was there, I had the opportunity to witness the faithful coming to worship. The church is built on a hill and is approximately a mile from the harbor. Thousands of pilgrims come to see the icon displayed and to light candles for prayers. It is common for some pilgrims to crawl on their hands and knees from the harbor all the way up the hill to the church and then into the building to kiss the icon and present prayers. There is even a carpet runner on the sidewalk to make the journey easier on their knees. I was able

to witness this personally and even though there were hundreds of people in the crowd, they would part and make way for the particular pilgrim to crawl through to the icon. I saw one worshiper kiss the icon and then lovingly stroke the frame as if she were caressing a beloved family member. I was touched by this display of faith and devotion.

In the gospel reading today, we hear a scripture from Mark which talks about faith like that: Faith that starts out as small as a mustard seed.

A Mustard seed was one of the smallest seeds in the early world. It measures about 2-3 mm in size, and comes in three colors: white, yellow and black. Mustard was not planted or cultivated in Jesus' time. It grew spontaneously along the paths and roadways and I was able to see that plant frequently along the roadside, while on my trip. We think of the common mustard plant as being roughly no taller than a two to three feet in height, however in the Mediterranean it can develop into a shrub, up to three meters in height. Mark says that it can grow into a mighty shrub and the birds can rest in its shade. It is considered a cruciferous plant as it gets this name from the cross-shaped flowers that it produces.

Saint Paul defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, a certainty of what we do not see.” He goes on to say in Romans 8 that “what is seen does not need to be hoped for. For who hopes for what he can already see? “. In 2 Corinthians 4:18 he affirms that “we look not at what can be seen, but what cannot be seen; for what is seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Our Christian faith espouses a belief in the teachings of Christ, which is ultimately a reflection of God’s hope and promises for us. A promise of living in full communion with our Trinitarian God and with each other. A promise based on love; love of our Creator and love for each other.

Our faith is what sustains us. For as Saint Paul mentions in the second reading, “ we walk by faith and not by sight.” Our faith may not be manifested by making pilgrimages or kissing icons but we see displays of faith in our everyday lives. We have certainty that the sun will rise, even though in the darkness, we cannot see it. We are assured that the grass and flowers will sprout and the seasons will change. In the same way, we can be assured that God’s love for us is everlasting and that God's plan for us is for our ultimate joy. We display this faith in our lives when we feed the hungry, give housing to the homeless or financially support our parish. We also display it in smaller

ways such as being ethical in our business dealings or taking the time as a parent to listen to a child's concerns. But basically it is our reflection of the attitude that we believe in living our lives in full harmony with our Creator and each other.

Returning to the mustard seed analogy, when we first believe, our faith is minuscule. In some cases, it may sprout quickly. However, unlike mustard, our faith needs cultivation and care to grow and thrive. We are familiar with the parable of the sower, mentioned earlier in this same chapter of Mark. You will recall that some of the seed that was sown was eaten by birds; some fell on rocky soil so that it sprouted but withered quickly due to lack of nourishment. Some grew in decent soil but grew among thorns which ultimately choked the plant and killed it. But the seed that fell on the good soil, sprouted and developed into a plant bearing grain, which then went on to yield more plants which produced more grain, etc.

One way in which our faith can be cultivated is through EFM, education for Ministry or also known as Exploring Faith Matters. This weekend, we celebrate the graduation of EFM students who have completed four years of study. I am proud to be counted in that group. And even though my plans are to pursue the ordained ministry, EFM is not just for those candidates. Every person of faith can benefit from EFM, even those of other faiths. It enhances every ministry that we are involved in. In EFM, we not only learn scripture but we explore the background of Christianity. We may learn complicated terms such as hermeneutics and exegesis, but ultimately we explore what our faith means and how it has developed over the centuries. We explore what various biblical scholars and theologians have written over the centuries and why we believe what we believe. We learn where some of our liturgical rites come from. For example, do you know why we recite the Nicene Creed or why we don't venerate icons here in the west? Did you know that the book of Mark is the shortest of all the gospels and probably the earliest? These topics are all discussed in EFM. Exploring our faith does matter!

But by far, the most valuable lesson we learn in EFM has to do with the relationships we develop in the group. This is the fertilizer that sustains our faith. It is the good soil. When I first started EFM, I thought, like others, that I could sustain my faith alone. Going to church and reading the Bible seemed enough to me to keep me spiritually fed. But I was wrong. I learned about God's true plan for us, which is to have an intimate, loving relationship with

Our Creator. I learned that this type of relationship cannot be formed in a vacuum. We need community to develop and sustain this. We need to reach out to other faiths and form bonds with them, to find our common ground. We need to discuss our beliefs and come to an understanding of what we agree or disagree with. We need to see the value in each individual, regardless of race, belief systems, social status, gender or ethnic origin. We need to see that we may be different colors, but we are all the same mustard seed. And we can grow and provide shade for others to rest in and nourishment to help others flourish as well. We can all support each other on our journeys of faith. We may form relationships on our own, but our common bond as fellow members of the body of Christ results in relationships that are deeper and longer lasting. We learn to love each other in spite of our faults and see each other more with God's eyes than with our own. We bear with each other through all our faults and failings.

We may begin as tiny mustard seeds, but that mighty shrub that we become can spread and cover our world and make a difference. This is the kingdom of God and it is here now. This is the Jesus movement!

Amen.