

GENTLENESS

The Second Sunday after Easter; Year C
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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Scott Richardson +

In the Name of God: Creator, Christ and Spirit. Amen.

I'm going to do you a favor today – I'm not going to say much about Doubting Thomas as the exemplar of modernity, the one who represents us in all our brave and brilliant doubt. That's a sermon worth hearing, no doubt. It's also a sermon that's been preached in almost every Episcopal Church in the nation since the turn of the century - the 19th century. Instead, I want to talk about our other two lessons – the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation of Saint John the Divine. These two lessons frame the key experience of the infant church and remind us of both the difficulty and the promise of keeping faith today.

You'll recall that Saint Peter, on the night Jesus was arrested, ran away like a terrified kitten. In Acts, he comes back as a roaring lion. He's been arrested for loving Jesus and testifying to his resurrection. He stands before the council, the high priest interrogates, and the charge is made – persisting in belief in Jesus will bring the heavy arm of Rome down on all the people of Jerusalem, believers and non-believers. This continues a theme from Jesus' trial – better for one man to die than the whole nation. Now it's rendered in slightly different terms; better to renounce one man than to risk many. But Jesus didn't buy it then and Peter isn't buying it now. Following his Master precisely, he doesn't heed the authority of Rome or the authority of this tribunal. He's seen too much. Rome and the religious authorities killed Jesus but God raised him up; that being the case, Peter's disinclined to listen too carefully to the advice of those who never got it in the first place and who can only make it worse now. Like Jesus, Peter is willing to risk death rather than turn away from that which he knows, in his bones, to be true.

And that brings us to the lesson from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine. The early believers in Jesus could be this bold because they believed in the teleological promise. That's a fancy way of saying they believed in the final vision the Revelation proclaimed – the forces of good and evil have it out (guess which side Rome is on) and goodness prevails. Light overcomes darkness, justice overcomes oppression, truth overcomes falsehood, God overcomes Satan, and all is well at the end. The early believers never expected that all would be well on the way – the fresh memory of the crucifixion deleted that false notion immediately. They did believe that Jesus the Anointed One, in his dying and rising, defeated the powers and principalities of death, ignorance, and oppression. They could, therefore, act boldly in his name, endure the risk and suffering of the present moment, and trust that glory awaited them at the end.

Those of you who have been following global events over the past decade might pause here – the description I've just offered of the early believers sounds uncomfortably similar to those in our world today who listen only to God and who are capable of dastardly deeds done in his name. A little bit of Doubting Thomas might go a long way right now. How, you might ask, are the apostles all that different from other religious

extremists? Good question – there are similarities, particularly in their absolute devotion to their deity and their lack of concern for lesser authorities. But let's get teleological again – the end is different and the means of getting there vary markedly. Their end, the Christian end, was a Kingdom where love prevailed. The ethic of Jesus and his followers was non-violent, merciful, and inclusive. There were zealots in the days of Jesus but he was not numbered among them, nor were his followers. They were uncompromising about their loyalties but they were not oppressive in applying them to others.

And here's where today's Thomas story is helpful – Jesus persuades Thomas through patient presence. Jesus doesn't bludgeon Thomas for his disbelief but makes himself available so that Thomas can come into the truth directly and experientially. That gentle method becomes normative for his followers. They go out into the world to tell of their resurrected Master and to teach his Way – charity for all, concern for the least, trust at the end. Their ease of spirit proves to be as persuasive as the message itself. Their willingness to die rather than kill for their truth seals the deal.

And that's our spiritual inheritance. That's the message and the method bequeathed to us. That word has worked its way down through the centuries to inform God's people and shape their souls. Two stories regarding George Washington quickly convey this spirit of humility, service, and gentleness. In the first, he's out riding with friends. His horse leaps a fence and clips the top stone, knocking it down. He immediately stops, climbs down, and replaces the stone. His friend says to him, "What are you doing? You're too big a man to bother with that." Washington replies, "No I'm not – I'm just the right size."

The second story follows the same theme. A corporal commands three privates to move a log that is quite simply too big for the trio to handle. He rebukes them verbally as they labor unsuccessfully under the strain. A rider comes by and asks why the corporal doesn't pitch in. The corporal is offended by the question and asserts his rank. The rider dismounts, takes off his overcoat, and leans in to help with the task – only then does the corporal realize that he's been conversing with General Washington.

So, at his best, Washington was both a gentleman and a gentle man. Jesus, in like manner, is gentle with Thomas in our gospel today. Gentleness is identified as one of the fruits of the Spirit in the Epistle to the Galatians. In the history of Christian preaching this concept has been treated in a variety of ways. It has come to mark the person who is meek, sweet, mild, good natured, considerate, patient, courteous, quiet, willing to endure injury with patience and without resentment, modest but willing to try when a job needs to be done. Aristotle thought it to be that state that is halfway between excessive anger and indifference. Ancient Greeks applied the word to animals that were powerful yet tame. Gentleness does not imply a propensity to absorb injury without response but it does require proportionality and reason and restraint in that response.

As I was typing this description two days ago the person who kept coming to mind as the model for this type of Christian was Gerry Walcutt. Some of you know that Gerry passed away this week at the age of eighty-six. He spent his life in ministry as a chaplain in a variety of institutions – some of them quite threatening – and this spirit of gentleness was, I'm sure, a balm to all he served. Gerry's depth of spirit was innate and it was hard earned; few knew, for instance, that he lost one of his three precious daughters to a drunk driver. The journey to forgiveness was long and twisted but he walked it and

found release and blessing at the end. That was part of the balm and the gift and the blessing that he shared with us during his time here as a canon of this cathedral and a healer of souls. We will miss him terribly and we will honor him daily by extending his legacy of gentleness in all the fullness of that word and in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and, this week, Gerry's Savior. Amen.