

“Face to Face”

Genesis 32:22-31; *Psalm 17:1-7, 15*; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

It had been a busy Saturday in November of 1975. Kay and I were living in military housing at the nearby Air Station and the majority of the day had been devoted to household chores, gardening and lawn care, and making the weekly run to the Parris Island Commissary.

Later in the day, sounds from a bedroom indicated that our eight month old daughter Lillian was awake from her nap. As Kay and I approached the doorway we saw Lillian standing in her crib enjoying a nice breeze coming through the windows. Two of our next door neighbors, both elementary age boys from South Bend, IN, were standing at the windows singing softly to Lillian when their father walked up, announced supper was ready and Mom was waiting.

Our neighbor was an active duty Marine and Military Policeman, and knew that I worked at the Station Clinic as a Navy Corpsman. He asked if I had heard about the accident the night before. “Accident?” I said. “Yes.” he responded. “Two corpsman from the clinic were on their way home from Laurel Bay on a motorcycle when a car pulled out in front of them.” Kay and I looked at one another and our stomachs sank. I immediately called the Clinic and the sad news was confirmed. Both of our friends had been pronounced dead at the hospital. In months and weeks past, they had visited and broken bread at our dinner table, and cradled Lillian in their arms. In the words of the apostle Paul, sadness and anguish filled our hearts. (Rom. 9:2)

All of us can relate to that Saturday in November. Life affords us the unpleasant opportunity of receiving terrible news when we least expect it, the loss of a loved one or a close friend. It happened to Jesus, too. The Bible says that John the Baptist was executed by way of an order given by Herod. Afterwards, his disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

Herod was not a good person and his life provides a glaring example of how power has a way of corrupting the human spirit. Jesus seeks a place of comfort and peace. He withdraws to a deserted place, but his departure does not go unnoticed. A crowd of people follow him and when Jesus comes ashore they are already there waiting.

In front of so many people, Jesus could have responded to the situation in a number of ways. He could have turned and returned home. He could have ignored or pushed the crowd away. He could have offered a brief word of blessing and then excused himself, but instead he does something else. In a time that called for personal space, prayer, and self-reflection, Jesus sees people who are hungry and sick, and he has compassion for them. He engages the people where they are, with their needs, bumps and bruises, and he shares the gift of presence.

And you know the rest of the story. The people have nowhere to go. The hour is late and they are exhausted. A turning point in the story comes when the disciples advise Jesus to send the people away. However, Jesus refuses, “Have them stay and you give them something to eat.” The disciples resist and Jesus quickly responds. He embraces the crowd, blesses the food, and gives it to his disciples for distribution. And so it is with us. By way of the Lord’s Table, Jesus embraces us, blesses bread and cup, and provides us the gift of presence through the grace of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. This, then, is our task. As Jesus gives to us, we are called to share with others with the faith that all who receive will be filled.

The observation has been made that nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus described in terms of his virtues, but always in his actions and in his relations with others. (Hans Kung, *On Being A Christian*, page 551) And this is a very important lesson for the Christian and the church. As Jesus sought the comfort of privacy for rest and prayer, needs of the people came first. The time for further rest and prayer would come later.

If we carry anything away from the gospel this morning, may it be the understanding that like Jacob who said, "I have seen God face to face;" by way of the gospel we, too, see God face to face in the person of Jesus Christ, the God who has made a promise that we are his children and we belong to him, the God who embraces, blesses, and takes care of us when we are in need.

Compassion like that expressed by Jesus sometimes involves long, grinding work. Following the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus enjoys a brief time at night for rest and prayer. Almost immediately, he is involved in the task of helping others in a time of crisis. The disciples are caught in the middle of a squall, their boat battered by waves. Surprise! Jesus is there, early in the morning, bringing peace to the storm.

Following a Saturday in November of 1975, there was the Monday two days later when the Officer in Charge of the Medical Clinic issued the request that I meet with him in his office where he and my Senior Chief asked that I escort the remains of one of two friends back home to family living in Indianapolis, IN. I met with Bob Horth's family and friends, attended the funeral and the burial, and by the end of the week returned to Beaufort. Back at work, the mood was somber but as the days passed by, life and laughter returned to the hallways and work-spaces.

And such is the gospel story for us today. Knowing that Jesus has experienced what we experience, seems to lighten the "heaviness of life" that we sometimes feel, or at least it does for me.

And another thing. It is when life is most delicate and fragile, that we can, on good days and bad days, turn to the good news of the gospel and meet God face to face in the person of Jesus Christ, and it is in this experience that our Lord challenges us to choose and engage life.

According to the apostolic witness of the early church, we are children of the promise. Today, my friends, face to face with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, may we eat and drink from the Lord's Table, and be filled with the love, forgiveness, and reconciliation offered to all of us by Christ.

May we rest tonight and offer prayers like Jesus for the morning will soon come, life will begin anew, and a neighbor will stand in need of our friendship, support and help. Amen.