7th Sunday after Easter

Do not make God too small. I think this is one of the biggest temptations we face.

Every week we pray the Lord’s prayer— and in that prayer, we pray “deliver us from temptation”.  This is actually heavy stuff, and this isn’t the temptation of chocolate cake or the temptation like the red devil sitting on your shoulder in the cartoon, instead this is better translated as “save us from the time of trial,” in which we are tempted to say there is no God.  This is the sin of apostasy, of saying that there is no God. Most of the time, most of us will not face many situations when we believe, let along say aloud, that there is no God. Sometimes in our darkest hours, it can feel that way. That said, what we are much more likely to do is to make God not so important in our world. And although God made us all, we are the ones who actively make God too small. As if God couldn’t handle the big stuff in our lives.

Thursday was Ascension Day, the day we celebrate when Jesus ascended into the heavens. It is celebrated more in churches that bear the name Church of the Ascension (as it should be) and more in Anglo-Catholic parishes, but in Acts we have the story of Jesus’s ascension into heaven, marking that moment. Today is the last Sunday of the Easter Season. Next Sunday is Pentecost. We hear in today’s reading that the people who first hold onto what they want God to do, what they think God in Jesus should be doing,  “so now is the time that you are going to restore Israel?”  Well Jesus effectively puts them in their places… “It is not for you to know…” in other words, don’t make God too small, God will do what God will do… And then a little later, when they witnessed something wonderful, and are standing there, staring up at the clouds, full of, I don’t know, wonder?, and are told by people in white… (might they be angels?), “why are you staring in the sky?” the angels are messengers from God, and yes the disciples are at it again, they are making God too small. Not doing what Jesus wants them to be doing… sitting there looking glory bound, but not furthering the kingdom.

In the letter of 1 Peter, we know these early followers were in the midst of persecution. We like to think that all persecutions of Christians happened because of the faith which they held. Most of the time, it was not so much the faith itself – as it was for the Coptic Christians murdered this week (may God have mercy on them) – but instead the product or praxis of the faith, the behavior that comes from or grows out of the faith.  In many cultures and times, you can believe the sky is purple, and it makes no difference to those in power, but when you start acting as if captives should be free, that marginalized people have rights, and that God’s love makes a difference— that’s generally when the trouble starts. It was this threat to power of the religious elite, seen in God’s love in Jesus that got Jesus crucified as a radical. And It was the threat to power that early Christians proclaiming AND acting on God’s love that caused them to be persecuted.

Believing in God is not just an acquiescence to faith; it cannot be limited to a positive response to faith. Words spoken only go so far. Instead it is the actions that matter. Faith that makes a difference is not only about the words. And by example of these early followers, we too are charged, encouraged and demanded to not just SAY we believe in God, but to let the things that come from that belief happen. If they don’t, we make God too small.

The Gospel from John today is from the beginning of what is termed Jesus’s Farewell Discourse. The discourse is actually a prayer, a request of God. Jesus speaks about a reciprocity, a relationship between himself and the father, but then also what that means for the followers.  Jesus is so open to the power of God, Jesus’s life shows us what life lived in God is like.  Jesus affirms that believing in him is believing in the Father, these are so intricately connected. The next part gets tricky. “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” How are we to do that? Notice some part of this comes from God…. Jesus prays that God protect them, in Jesus’s name, (as honor and glory to Jesus), but for what purpose? for the very reason that they may be one.

How are you and I to be one with one another? Well, it helps to have fellowship, to come together every week under this roof, it means to be in communion, but not just at Holy Communion, but to care for the other. We can pray for grace and let God into our dealings with each other and then as in Peter have the actions affect what our words say.  There are two directions to this.  There is the provision and care that you can give outwardly, giving to the poor and less fortunate, taking care of the aged and sick, the refugee, but there is also HOW you take things and situations in, how you process them.  One of the hardest, but most effective ways is always to think the best of the other. Maybe you don’t know how to interpret what a friend, or family member or acquaintance said or did, or it flat out angers you or ticks you off. Try assuming that that person meant the best. Maybe the person did, and maybe they didn’t. If you assume they meant the best, chances are they will live into that even if they didn’t mean the best. If you assume they meant the best, and in fact they did, you help strengthen the communion with the other. The other part is to not hold someone to a higher expectation than you do yourself. You never ever know the whole story, even if it is your spouse or child, let alone if the other is a friend, acquaintance or stranger that has given some offense. These two outlooks on how to interpret the other go a long way toward living as in communion, as many parts making a whole.

And if we don’t do these things, if we live as if we are in silos and as if we are judges of others, then we again make God too small.  We make God too small to work good and healing and growth in every relationship we have, and in every situation of need there is. We cheapen the effect of the resurrection and we make it all about us and how we process and view the world.

And so the resurrection matters, the working towards the kingdom in all that we say and do matters. God’s love in Christ changing our hearts so that we forgive before deep hurts are set in place in our hearts, this matters. And so acting and hearing in love matters. You matter, but God matters more. God is not too small, not too small for any hurt, real or perceived; not for any hard relationship; not for any situation of poverty, whether of the wallet or the heart or both; not for the distance between knowing another as a stranger or as a friend. God…the God of the resurrected and ascended Jesus who reigns not just in Jerusalem but in the whole world…God is not too small.