

Sermon, 27 April 2008—Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

We have been talking over the last several Sundays about the baptism and Eucharist, the two principal sacraments of the Christian faith. This is an ancient practice, which began when the season of Lent was used to prepare people for baptism and the season of Easter was used to interpret the mysteries into which they had been initiated.

Today, we are reflecting on the fact that these two sacraments only make sense if we recognize that we live in a world that always carries the potency and potential of sacrament. In addition to our participating in the designated sacraments, because the Church affirms that Christ has given us those as a sure and certain means of grace, we could also acknowledge that God is always approaching us through matter, that in fact the entire world can be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

This intuition is what we are encouraging Donnie and Zack and Maggie and Sam to remember as they mark this milestone in their journey to adulthood today. Children seem to take for granted that God is active around them. Too often we think, because children seem so matter-of-fact about it, that such a wonderful confidence can only be asserted in a childlike, even childish, way. So we think that, if we are to believe at all, God must remain the biggest and best of our imaginary friends. Of course, adults who want to set aside childish things set aside that picture of God: we are not babies any more, so we don't need taking care of and we don't need stories to explain facts we can now understand in more direct and material ways. So we throw the baby out with the manger straw—if I can put it that way.

But truly to be an adult means that we become clearer about what we can and cannot understand. Only foolish adults—and I am afraid there are many of them—would insist that because they don't understand something, then it doesn't exist. In fact, adulthood is the discovery that we know less and less than we thought we did or could, and that knowing less and less can be a wonderful thing, if one of the things we *do* know is God—not a thing at all, of course, but a person; and we know persons very differently from the way we know things. If we at least know God, then we can pick up the traces of the movement of God in the world around us. That is what it means to have a sacramental worldview: we see that everything is a location and an opportunity for God to act and to strengthen us with grace.

This is what Paul is reminding his listeners of on the Areopagus. He has found an altar dedicated “to the unknown god,” and is quick to build on that. Yes, God is unknown to us. If we think blocks of stone or sheets of gold are God, then clearly God is unknown to us. But when we realize that God made everything there is, and when we recognize that we don't know everything there is, and never will be able to know everything there is, then it is not surprising that in a fundamental way God is always unknown to us. It is crazy to pretend that we can offer God anything that God needs, since everything we have is what God has given us: God has given us “life,” Paul says, “and breath and all things.” In fact, when we look at human beings, we see that for us and for every person who has ever been or ever will be “the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live” are given to them; we do not create or choose when or where we will live. All of it, constantly, abundantly, delightfully, freely, is a gift to us.

Paul adds that once the arbitrariness and unnecessaryness of our actual life dawns on us, its true freedom in every sense, then the mystery of our

existence—why do Donnie or Zack or Maggie or Sam or you or I exist at all?—begins to work in us and make us itch, and then we start to “grope” for God. The joke, of course, is that, if we only knew, we don’t need to grope at all, because “in Him, we live and move and have our being;” we’re already standing smack in the middle of what we’re looking for. The glasses you’re looking for are already on your head—which has always been pretty funny, from the time glasses were invented. In fact, this wonderful phrase that rolls off our tongues so easily and gratefully—“in Him we live and move and have our being”—is another sly joke, because it is a pagan quotation. Luke has Paul shrewdly quoting from a Greek writer, showing, not only that he knows the cultural world and outlooks of his listeners, but that they already have the wisdom of unknowing that he is encouraging them to recognize, just as they already have the loving gifts of God in the world around them.

That, you see, is the heart of the sacramental worldview: you are already standing in blessing all the time. You can’t step out of blessing, though you can refuse it. The designated sacraments, which are done for us in bright colors and big letters and very slowly, while we are being told “watch” and “stay awake” and “remember” and “do this,” in addition to everything else they are, are samples, so you can get the taste and the feel and the words of the wonder, so you can recognize it when you come across it out in what is secular and mundane. Who knows?—God-willing, you might even become the agent, not always the recipient, of grace yourself. You can grow up to be the distributor of good, and not remain a spiritual infant, always the recipient of good, gurgling or bawling according to mood.

So what happens in sacraments? We remember something; we show something; and we promise something. We remember, show, and promise Christ; we remember, show, and promise the life of Jesus again among us.

We remember not only the action, but the command. So we baptize people in obedience, as Jesus himself was baptized. In the middle of our Eucharistic Prayer, we repeat Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me," and perhaps then we think of who he was and what he did and how he died and what he now is forever. We remember that, just as we give our body and soul and spirit in baptism, so Christ gives us himself and his spirit in the Eucharist. This is the food of pilgrims—all those who are on the path that has been walked ahead of them by the one who said "follow me."

We show what it is like to be Christlike. We welcome strangers into our household of faith so that they can share with us in Christ's eternal priesthood—because that is what Christ did. We offer to all who wish it the Body and Blood of Christ, because that is what he did. This table is not only a showing of the Last Supper, it is also a showing of the radical hospitality and equality of the community Jesus gathered around him. Our standing side by side, our drinking from the same cup, is our showing that private privileges and exclusive rights have no place among Jesus' followers, because that was not how he lived, but we eat from a table with room for all.

We promise something also, because we know that the unity of the Eucharist is not yet fully ours. Everything in our Christian life is already and not yet. We are already saved, but not yet saved—already saved because God has acted and we have responded, but not yet saved because we are still on this bank of Jordan. We are already one because God sees us all in Christ, but not yet one because we do not yet see Christ in each other and all of us in Christ, as we will when we see him as he is in heavenly realms. We are already raised to new life because the spirit of the Risen Christ is given to us, but not yet raised to new life because we remain in our mortal bodies, fallible and finite and frail. This banquet is already, but not yet, the

heavenly banquet, because we have in it a foretaste of the peace and unity of that heavenly city, though we know from our suffering that we are not there.

In other words, in sacraments, we recall the dangerous memory of Jesus, and we see how we are to behave as Christians, and we pledge ourselves to be for others the future that God has promised to us. In a mysterious way, we can already live in that future by faith; that means, we can already act as if we are one, as if the triumph of justice and mercy has taken place, as if all has been already forgiven and restored. That also is to live sacramentally in the world: not only might we see all of nature and all of culture and all of history as means by which God made goodness known to us and effective in us, but we also might make the grace which the sacraments make available to us actual in our interactions with others on a daily basis. What God is about is the restoration and sanctification of time and space, and that means the restoration and sanctification of human history. God restores and sanctifies by participation: that's how God does it. God became one of us; God enters what God has made. That is how God realigns all things and blesses all things—not by being remote from them, but by being in them, and making God's holiness and glory known in them.

So, Donnie and Zack and Maggie and Sam: know that the world is a wondrous place, and you can make it more wonderful. You can not only see God at work in the world around you, but you can *be* God at work in the world around you, because the world is made to function as a sacrament, and, if we have the Spirit of Christ, we can be the means of grace for each other, to encourage each other to bless each other, until the day such grace is no longer needed, because we will enter into the eternal life of the Holy Trinity, whom we praise today as Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever.