

Second Sunday of Easter

Some people approach prayer the way they approach medication. If you get sick, you look for the right medicine, and you try different treatments until you find one that works. In the spiritual life, if you want God to do something, you may try different types of prayer until you find the one that produces the results you want. Some people have you establish criteria for God's response: "Just say this five times, and God will always grant your intention," or "Leave 15 copies of this prayer in a church, and God will fulfill your request." That is approaching God as if you were Aladdin: Rub the bottle until a genie appears, and then make three wishes. It really does not work that way, which is a good thing because God knows what is best better than we do. And in a passage like today's gospel, God seems anxious to do what is best.

We hear the well-known episode about Thomas every year on the Second Sunday of Easter because its climax comes one week after Jesus rose from the dead. Like the disciples, we have regathered one week after Easter, and here we encounter the risen Christ - in the bible, in the eucharist, and in one another.

Jesus appears twice in this passage from John: first on Easter day when the group is locked inside a room; and then a week later after Thomas is locked in his own interior room. To the first group, Jesus yearns so strongly to reveal the resurrection that he enters the locked room like Houdini, or like a ghost with visible wounds.

When Thomas heard what he had missed, he must have thought the others were joking. He speaks for many of his own generation and of every generation since, when he says, without a personal revelation as the others claimed, he would not believe. Thomas puts criteria on his belief. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Thomas doesn't want faith; he wants evidence. Now, Jesus did not have to do this. He could have made Thomas rely on the testimony of others, as each of us has done. But because of Jesus' human heart and divine mercy, just as he entered a locked room to stir up the faith of the disciples, so he enters the closed mind of Thomas. He meets him right where Thomas demands to be met.

Unbelief still exists in the world, and any believer may succumb to it from time to time. When we do not get the answer we want to our prayers, or when God does not meet our criteria, we stay inside the closed room, refusing to go out.

This gospel portrays a God who desperately wants to break through the walls that we set up for him. Those walls could be the prejudice we feel toward people who think or look different from us, or a determination to have God act the way we mapped out for him. Just as we may exclude someone who does not support the way we think, we may be excluding God as well. But John depicts a God who wants to break in, who stands inside the room with us, if only we would lift our eyes and see, lift our fingers and touch. It's an act of humility to see another person in a different light or to change the plans we thought were best. But when we do, like Thomas, we just might have a new encounter with Christ.

Sunday, April 28, 2019