

“Halfway Through the Fifty Days”

I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

May 18, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Who are we? Where are we going, spiritually? Do we know the way? And how is the journey going? These questions are the basis of this message “Halfway Through the Fifty Days.”

Who are we? United Methodist pastor Dr. Martha Myre once gave a children’s sermon on Laity Sunday. The word “laity” comes from the Greek, *laos totheon*, meaning “people of God.” Dr. Myre asked the children if any of them knew what “laity” meant. A general shaking of heads let her answer her own question: “everyone here is laity, including you children.”

At that moment an earnest and irritated seven year old boy jumped in: “No, I’m not a laity, I’m a gentleman.” After the laughter subsided, Dr. Myre tried again: “Maybe I should call you lay persons?” Again, another child asked, “Does that mean all we do is take naps?”

All of us, except me, Pastor Hal, the Rev. Art Yost and the occasional visiting clergyperson, are laity; and the clergy were laity to begin with. As we affirm each week on our bulletin cover, we are all ministers. The letter from Peter today is even bolder: we are *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...”*

Some of us don’t believe it. It is a phenomenon I call “Protestant monasticism:” the idea that the clergy are spiritual proxies for the rest of us. Nothing could be further from the sentiment of first century Christianity or early Methodism. We are all ministers, priests to God, God’s own people.

So where are we going, spiritually, this assembly of priests? Early Methodism asked two questions weekly of its members that moved them from the question of “Who are we?” to “Where are we going?” Those questions were “How goes it with your soul?” and “What works of charity have you done?” Both imply action, movement. They echo Peter’s words: *“Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation....”*

We are now just over halfway through what the church calls “The Great Fifty Days.” These are the fifty days from the festival of Easter, celebrating the resurrection of Christ, to the festival of Pentecost, celebrating the birth of the Church. In fact, if you want to amaze your family and impress your friends and neighbors, you can call it by its proper name, Quinquagesima (kwin-kwa-jess-ah-ma). Easter’s promise is new and abundant life through God’s resurrection of Christ from the dead. Has it made a difference? In what new ways is the resurrection power taking root in your life? Or have the last four weeks been “same old, same old?”

Life has peaks and valleys, doesn’t it? In a couple of weeks I’ll be running the Hamden Hills Half-Marathon which touts itself as the hilliest half-marathon (13.1 miles) in Connecticut. I don’t know about that, nor even entirely why I do it. But I do know that ups and downs are part of life. Even non-runners have heard of Heartbreak Hill, the infamous ascent in the Boston Marathon. Part of its infamy is its treachery: it is not a single hill, but a series of rises that end with the steepest coming at just the point—between miles 20 and 21—where runners fatigue and dehydration is described as “hitting the wall.” In the context of the question, “Where are we going spiritually?” you have to know as a runner that Heartbreak Hill is part of where you are going, as well as that tantalizing finish on Boylston Street at Copley Square.

Our spiritual journeys are the same, with peaks and valleys, highs and lows. As a congregation we made an important decision

for greater openness this past Thursday by signing the Covenant of Conscience, which promises all our sacraments and rituals will be open to all. Our Long-Range Plan is coming closer to formation, with the hope of an initial draft by mid-June. Being clear about goals, short and long term, is essential. For us as individual spiritual pilgrims, too. Changes in personal attitudes or behavior? Greater involvement in serving others? Deepening spiritual roots through Bible study and spiritual formation? Praying with greater intentionality? If we don't identify such goals and the steps needed to attain them, then we won't know where we're going. And if we don't know where we're going, any old way will do.

But I believe we do want and need a direction, as individuals and as a congregation. **Do we know the way?** Jesus' answer is clear in today's Gospel: *"Where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going."* When Thomas questions him famously *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Jesus replies that he is *"the way, the truth and the life."* Christ's love, Christ's forgiveness, Christ's acceptance, Christ's reconciliation, Christ's humility and Christ's conviction are ways we experience the presence of God: *"if you know me, you will know my Father also."* How many of those are we including in our own lives? Twelve-step programs speak of conducting a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" in examining the ways we need to change to stay healthy. Such an inventory serves our spiritual lives well, also.

Whatever the field – business, the industrial trades, higher education, work, art, sports – there are steps toward the goals we seek. Ask any high school senior (or their parents) about the college application process! This is true in our spiritual growth as well. Knowing the way means not only identifying and mastering the steps toward the goal, but often having someone guide us. A colleague said to me this week: "I didn't struggle quite as much in my first church after I asked for, and was assigned, a mentor." As we seek and follow Christ we have one who shows us the way.

So how's the journey going? I've always liked car travel but like most kids I would invariably ask "Are we there yet?" long before we were. My parents would chirp "Getting there is half the fun!" Funny thing: as I've aged, I appreciate that. Not just because I've had my own kids who've tortured me with "Are we there yet?" but because I've come to learn there are "pay offs" that happen along the journey as well as the pay off at having arrived.

What's the pay off in the church for our spiritual journey? I believe it is "community." One of our families says it this way: "We don't have any biological family here. The church is our family." Like all families, we aren't perfect, at least not yet. We have our occasional disagreements, some large and some small. But like the best of families we have love that knits us together and a special love in Jesus Christ, who calls us "*God's own people.*"

And as God's own people we have each other. It is what runner's call the Bislett Effect. The name comes from the old Bislett Stadium in Oslo, Norway, demolished in 2004 for a new stadium built a year later. It was a place where track and field records were broken: not once, twice, ten or twenty times but over fifty times. No other track can boast of such a record for record-breaking achievements. Why?

The secret is the crowd. The old track was narrow, with only six lanes instead of eight, and the grandstand is so steep that the fans were practically on top of you. Writes Ken Moore in "Runner's World" (Nov., 2003) "The sound of 21,000 [fans forces] you to keep your rhythm, the crowd's rhythm, for one more stretch, one more turn. The frenzied fans keep you going." Runners are inspired by community—and so are Christians. We are part of a community that upholds us in the journey, following Christ our head, growing into salvation, for the purpose of serving the world Christ came to save. Ken Moore's conclusion is most "preacher-esque:" "Our deepest nature is that we are at our most majestic when we do for others." Let the people say, "Amen."