**4 Easter**

**May 11, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Happy Mother’s Day! I think I have mentioned this on other Mother’s Day, but I learned the hard way that I should never try to preach about this special occasion. Many years ago I started a Mother’s Day sermon telling the congregation … with some sarcasm … that it was really a holiday invented by the greeting card companies, florists, and restaurants. My intent was to point out that mothers needed to be honored every day of the year … not just the second Sunday in May. Well, Dorothy Ebert … God rest her soul … was sitting in the first pew with a gorgeous corsage, a lap full of pastel colored envelopes, and her daughter and her family sitting next to her … no doubt they were taking her to a Mother’s Day Brunch following the service. Dorothy’s smile turned to a scowl and she never heard another word of my sermon. Oh well, lesson well learned. But happy Mother’s Day anyhow.

This morning’s reading from John’s Gospel is the familiar image of Jesus as the shepherd. As if to make sure we get the point those who selected our lectionary included the 23rd Psalm to add to the pastoral imagery. But in John’s Gospel we end up with the metaphors of Jesus as shepherd, gatekeeper, and gate. I think all of us like the idea of Jesus as shepherd … to guide us along to green pastures and protecting us from all the threats that are found in the wilderness. But it is the image of Jesus as gate and gatekeeper that bother me. I think I would trust Jesus in those roles, but it is when those roles have been transferred to the Church that I begin to become concerned. At times the Church tries to act as God’s gatekeeper, and I believe that when it does the Church refutes the very values it is called to uphold.

Each week, as I begin the prayer of consecration at the Holy Communion, I invite all those who are worshipping with us to fully participate in the sacrament.

*“This is a banquet that is set for all of God’s people, and I sincerely invite and encourage all who are worshipping with us to feel welcome to receive the Bread and Wine at our communion rail.”*

Many people in the congregation have affirmed me for this invitation. In some sense it is an extension of this congregation’s commitment to “radical hospitality.” However, not everyone agrees with this open invitation, and I have been criticized by a few for not limiting the invitation to only those who have been baptized.

The reasoning behind my invitation is simple: I don’t think one invites someone to dinner … as we do every week by advertising that we are a “diverse, inclusive and welcoming” congregation … and then ask people to sit and watch others eat and drink yet exclude them from that table fellowship. If they are not baptized and God’s Spirit leads them to receive the Bread and Wine, then I trust God’s Spirit, in due time, will also lead them on a spiritual journey that fulfills their particular need … not just the need of the Church.

Now, it is not my intention this morning to argue or debate the issue of an open communion. Rather, I point it out since it is part of a larger issue that has been with the Church since its earliest days … and it remains with us today. Specifically, who is to be included, and who is to be excluded, from full participation in the Church. We must remember that this congregation of St. Cyprian’s was formed over a century ago because African Americans were excluded from worship in the Episcopal Church because of the prevailing norm of racial segregation.

As Ambassador Andrew Young reminded the graduates of Flagler College at their Commencement this week, fifty years ago this city, state, and nation were consumed by the struggle of whether to include or exclude African Americans full access to accommodations, and voting, and jobs, and housing, and justice, and much more. Today … as we at St. Cyprian’s well know … the Anglican Communion, and the Episcopal Church in this country, is divided about who to include, and who to exclude, from full participation in the church. Granted, this is not just about who should receive communion, but it is about who is in, and who is out. Today the issue is centered around whether homosexual men and women are to be included or excluded from the full life of the Church. In some areas of the Episcopal Church the issue still centers around the role of women in the life and leadership of a congregation, and the whether or not to use contemporary English in our worship.

To me these seem to be issues of gate-keeping by the institutional Church … not about feeding the flock. When the Church gets stuck in the role of gatekeeper if denies the possibility of new life … the primary element of our faith.

We are in the season of Easter … the season of Resurrection … of new life given us by God. I believe that there is new life available for each of us, for this congregation, for this city, and for the entire world. The reality of the Resurrection … this “newness” … can be witnessed every single day. God takes what is broken, discarded, given up for loss, and left without hope, and God raises it up, proclaims its divine value, and gives it once more to us to be treasured.  Over and over, God does this with our households and our families, our congregations and communities, with those whom we love and those whom we despise, with those who care for us and those who would cause us harm. And God does this with the Church as a whole, and even with congregations such as St. Cyprian’s, and cities such as St. Augustine.  God yearns to do it with all of us in every aspect of our lives.  God is calling us and leading us into “newness” … into new life. That is the unimaginable depth of God's love. This newness is available to all of God’s children regardless of the color of one’s skin, or the gender of the one we love.   
  
Every time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist we live out the mystery of this resurrection, God's lifting up, transforming, and returning us for new and godly use.  We do it when, at the Offertory, we give back to God of the various treasures God has given us, so that they may be renewed in purpose and redirected to serve the mission of God.  We do it when we offer to God the elements of bread and wine, and receive them back as holy food for holy people.  And we do it when each of us steps from the pew into the sacred procession that leads to God's own table where we offer ourselves, to be made "one body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him."  With Jesus, we give ourselves back to God that God might lift us up, bless us, and make of us what the world most needs for its healing. And I don’t think this blessing of God’s grace is reserved for only those who have known the ritual of Baptism in the Church … God’s grace is certainly more expansive than that.  
  
All this happens not because of us, but because of God.  Not because we deserve it or earn it, but simply and only because God loves us.  As God has done with the body of Jesus, the Bread of Life, so God does with you and with me.  No matter who we are and what we have become, God raises us to God's self, kisses us with new life, and gives us back to the world that we might feed it with love.  That is the resurrection of the body – Jesus' body, our bodies, the Church as the Body of Christ.

When you come forward to this communion rail and take into your own hands the Bread of Heaven, I encourage you to remember God's divine understanding, fidelity, and immeasurable love.  Remember this city and this congregation. And most of all remember that in Jesus' resurrection, you and I are gathered, blessed, and returned to the world in newness of life, to be the bread that feeds its every need.

Remember that we are made a new people in the Resurrection. This is true for our city, for this congregation, and each of us. “This is a banquet for all of God’s people …” not just the bread and wine of our Holy Communion, but for the banquet of life.

Amen.