

**4 Easter  
May 7, 2017**

**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.**

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 community, 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 communities like St. Augustine. God yearns to do it with all of us in every aspect of our lives. God takes what is broken in our lives ... relationships ... our self-worth ... our sense of purpose ... and God raises it up, transforms it, proclaims its divine value in our lives, and gives it new life. God is calling us and leading us into "newness" ... into new life. That is the unimaginable depth of God's love. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

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. This "newness" and "abundance" is available to all of God's children regardless of the color of one's skin, or the gender of the one we love, or whether we are "strange" to those around us.

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 readings for today included the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 the image of Jesus as gate and gatekeeper bothers 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 ... especially during this season of the Resurrection.

During this season ... for that matter on every Sunday of the year ... we proclaim the Resurrection. 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. That is what the Resurrection means, and that is what the Eucharist means ... 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. At the end of the reading from John's gospel this morning Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The Resurrection is about abundant life.

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 holy food for holy people. It is a banquet that is set for all of God's children, 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 ... including our bishop ... 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 and at the same time exclude them from that table fellowship. If they are not yet 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 Jim Crow norm of racial segregation.

Two weeks ago, as we celebrated the life and ministry of the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, the first full time clergy of this congregation ... the man who was the pastor of St. Cyprian's from 1900 until his death in 1917 ... we heard about Cassey's struggle as an African American clergy in the Episcopal Church. He started churches and schools to serve African Americans when the gatekeepers of our society denied people of color access to education and communities of faith. He was the first African American clergy ordained in the Episcopal Church west of the Mississippi. He was the first black Episcopal clergy in North Carolina, and he may have been the first Episcopal clergy of color in Florida. He was ordained as a deacon, but never allowed to be ordained a priest because the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Florida ... and of every other diocese in which he served ... the Standing Committees was the gatekeeper ... did not believe that he was qualified in spite of his bishops' endorsements.

Today ... as we at St. Cyprian's know well ... 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 ... at least in this diocese ... the issue is centered on whether homosexual men and women are to be included or excluded from the full life of the Church.

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.

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. 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.

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 community, for this congregation, and each of us. "This is a banquet for all of God's children ..." not just the bread and wine of our Holy Communion, but for the banquet of

life. And remember what Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Amen.