

3 Pentecost
June 25, 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.**

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." WOW! The ultimate symbol of peace quoted as saying he did not come to bring peace, but rather a sword ... a weapon of death. Then Jesus ... to make his point ... went on to describe how a family unit could be divided. It sounds complicated on just a cursory reading. I have seen people use two large pieces of newsprint to diagram the family structure and how it gets divided ... and why. But, I'm not going to go there. I will only say that Jesus ... the ultimate symbol of peace ... is also the ultimate symbol of truth. And when truth is spoken to power it is as threatening to those in power as is the sword ... truth can be a weapon of death as well.. I will leave that one for us to ponder.

Instead, this morning I am going to take the liberty of talking about pilgrimage ... specifically mine over the past few weeks. As most of you know Caren and I have been in Europe ... first Paris, then the Basque country in southwestern France and northwestern Spain, and then on to London for a few days. Last year we traveled to southern England ... I thought it was going to be a vacation until I realized that it was actually a pilgrimage of sorts ... an accidental pilgrimage. This year the same thing happened ... what was approached as a vacation became a pilgrimage ... an interesting yet accidental pilgrimage.

Just a day after arriving in Paris I received an email from our office administrator, Holly Horahan. Holly doesn't usually bother me when I'm away like this, so I opened it fearing something dreadful had happened here at the church, or with one of you. That wasn't the case at all. Rather it was a forwarded message from another St. Augustine resident about something that might be of interest to St. Cyprian's. This fellow St. Augustine resident just happened to be visiting Paris and had found the reliquary of our namesake, St. Cyprian of Carthage, in a museum. He had no idea that we were also in Paris ... he just wanted to share some photos of the reliquary. (A reliquary is a vessel that holds a relic ... most often a religious relic of one kind or another.)

So the pilgrimage began. We went to the Petite Palais ... Paris' Museum of Fine Arts which was hosting an exhibit of ecclesiastical art from Paris churches. Lo and behold we found the reliquary of St. Cyprian of Carthage. The reliquary holds a relic from St. Cyprian and St. Symphorien and two other unnamed saints.

Now, I have to admit that I am not a great fan of religious relics. I'm a skeptic ... some would say a cynic about such things. I've never understood what the value of a relic was to one's faith. It was always a "so what?" So what if someone has a leg bone of the Apostle Paul ... or at

least they claim that is what it is. Or, so what if a church in Italy has locks of hair supposedly from Mary Magdalene, or another church the fingernail of an early martyr. Obviously, all of these objects were gained by robbing graves ... disturbing the final resting places of these saints of the Church. Or maybe, they were just any ol' grave, and any ol' leg bone, and anyone's locks of hair or fingernail ... who knows. As I said, I'm somewhat of a skeptic on these matters.

Almost 40 years ago I had dinner with some parishioners in Northern Virginia and after we finished dessert he brought out a sliver of wood smaller than a toothpick in a little glass jar. "This is a piece of the cross of Jesus," he said, "I bought it in Jerusalem from a small shop owner for \$300." I don't remember what I said ... I know I was stunned. I was stunned because I believe this man was robbed. I was stunned by his gullibility. I thought, "This is not someone to entrust the church's money to ... and he was our Treasurer!"

And then, when we were in London, we visited the Victoria and Albert Museum and they had several reliquaries on display. One of them contained a piece of the manger in which Jesus was born ... a little piece of wood in a tiny window surrounded by an elaborate gold container. As you may know, I don't believe the story of Jesus being born in a stable and being placed in a manger is historical fact. If the story is not historical fact, then this piece of wood is not a piece of Jesus' manger. But someone at some time in the past did believe that it was ... and they venerated it and built a church ... Holy Nativity ... to hold it and the reliquary that displayed it.

So this accidental pilgrimage to see the reliquary of St. Cyprian of Carthage was beginning to turn into a pilgrimage of curiosity. I started wondering ... what was the value of these relics to the people of the times these relics were collected? Why were they venerated? At times the churches that held these relics would have grand processions through their villages, and towns, and cities carrying them for all to see. What was it about relics that brought about such adoration?

In an age of "fake news" and "alternative facts" it is easy to impose our values and thinking process on those of an earlier age. However, as I read what I could find about relics I realized that for many this was a tangible connection to the martyrs of the early church ... those who had died at the hands of persecutors and had entered heaven after torture and death ... like Jesus before them. If these saints could endure those hardships, then certainly those who could view ... or possible even touch ... a relic of one of those martyrs could also endure whatever hardships were laid before them. Most of these people could not read or write and objects such as relics ... placed in ornate reliquaries ... told them a story about a faith that sustained them.

You've heard me say that for Bible stories I'm not so much interested in whether the story is factually true, but rather about the question how do I know this story to be true in my life today. My accidental pilgrimage to the reliquary of St. Cyprian of Carthage was beginning to offer insights into that question. St. Cyprian of Carthage is the patron for very few churches around the world. It is easy ... at least for me ... to see St. Cyprian as just our namesake ... not really a patron. But along the way, since his death by beheading over 1,700 years ago, St.

Cyprian has inspired many ... his reliquary is a testament to that. He endured persecution for his faith. He suffered torture because he would not recant Christianity. And he was beheaded because he steadfastly stood by his truth. He spoke truth to the power of the Romans who were demanding allegiance to their gods. Cyprian ... like Jesus before him ... was a man of peace. But he was also a man of truth ... his truth ... the truth that Jesus Christ was Lord and Savior. And the Roman sword was what killed Cyprian.

We ... this congregation of St. Cyprian's in the year of our Lord 2017 ... are people of deep Christian faith. Yet, our faith expression is not always acknowledged or accepted by other Christians. There are those who feel that there is only one true and orthodox faith expression of Christianity and those who do not express that particular flavor of faith ... such as us at St. Cyprian's ... are not "true" Christians. We at St. Cyprian's are all too often judged as unorthodox ... even heretical. My accidental pilgrimage to the reliquary of St. Cyprian has reinforced my commitment to steadfastly stand by the faith ... our expression of the Christian faith ... that informs my life and spirit.

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Taking seriously what Jesus took seriously is not always easy ... it can be risky. Yet, it is also life giving and spirit-filled ... and it is always truth-telling.

I invite you to join with me as we continue our pilgrimage at St. Cyprian's in this place, and at this time of the life of the world.

Amen.