

Homily June 1 2025

Let my faith be stronger than my fear,
Let my hope be stronger than my doubt.

Good morning.

When I give a homily, I often talk about finding the common thread in the passages assigned for that day. Sometimes I complain that it's hard to find any thread at all - but looking for the common thread often makes me dive deeper into the passages. This morning I found a couple of threads that seemed to weave through all them.

Now, I am often helped to understand the readings by reviewing commentaries written by other homilists, by accessing other reference material and through discussions with other parish members who attend our various Bible studies. But sometimes help comes from strange places. Most of you know that my husband Ray is in a nursing home with dementia. I visit him each Sunday after service and on a recent Sunday he was a bit late getting up, so I went to sit in the nearby lounge while the aides finished getting him dressed. Since it was Sunday morning the television in the lounge was tuned to a religious channel - specifically the Southern Baptist Network. Now many of you are aware of this particular denomination. It's quite conservative, very large and in a number of ways sees Christianity differently than Episcopalians do. I had never watched this channel before and I had never seen the preacher who spoke that morning. However I was a little interested to hear what they might have to say and as soon as I sat down the preacher, Donnie Swaggart, said something that seemed pertinent to this morning's readings. He asked, what is the opposite of faith. Now that's a question I thought I could answer: it's a lack of belief. Either you have faith and believe, or you don't believe. But Swaggart said no, the opposite of faith is fear. Now that takes some thinking. But fear is that which does not allow you to trust God's plan for you and for the world. And trust in God is what allows us to have faith. In this morning's reading from Acts, this issue of faith - of trusting in God's plan in the most dreadful of times is front and center.

So here's a little aside, a little sidetrack from this sermon. I've always thought that the Holy Spirit had a sense of humor and sometimes sets us in the right direction with a gentle poke. And I have to admit as I sat there listening to a preacher from a Christian denomination that I'm not particularly comfortable with, I thought, OK here's something for me to learn. And so maybe it's the Holy Spirit giving me a little nudge to open my mind. Now I don't know if that's true or not but I always like to think that way because it makes the Holy Spirit seem a little more accessible to me.

In addition to my encounter with the Southern Baptist Network via TV there was one other important part of my preparation for this homily. I have been doing some reading which has really colored my understanding of this morning's readings. I've been reading a book called "The Patient Ferment of the Early Church" by Alan Kreider. It is about the first three centuries of Christianity. The book deals with and explains a great deal about how small Christian communities who were often living in a dangerous environment were able to coalesce, to grow and to thrive.

One of the major ways that they were able to do this was their habitus. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined habitus as "how religious beliefs and values are internalized and expressed in daily life, ... Habitus can be understood as a 'way of life' shaped by both individual experiences and the broader social and cultural context of religion". Habitus was defined for early Christians as how they behaved as individuals and as a community in living out Jesus' teaching in their daily life.

So what was the habitus of these early Christians? Their common life centered around the church. Obviously they attended church services and discussion groups but they also fed the hungry and cared for the poor and for the widow. They rescued infants who were exposed - left to die because their families didn't want them, brought them into the Christian community and raised them. Members facing financial hardship were helped not expelled from the community. Money was lent with no expectation of earning interest on it, perhaps with the anticipation that it might not be returned. And these behaviors were extended not only to people within the Christian community, but to their neighbors outside - pagans and Hebrews - as well. These were amazing behaviors to those who lived around these Christian communities and they were attractive to others and this was part of what helped the small Christian churches to grow.

So we're going to come back to these two themes - the opposite of faith is fear and how habitus helped Christians to grow in the early church because these two factors are actually in today's Bible readings.

Let's start with the reading from Acts. Two stories here are connected. Paul and Silas had headed off to visit churches in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit led them instead to Philippi, a Roman city in Macedonia. When they got there they were disappointed. There was a very small Jewish community and most of them were women. They met on the beach instead of in a synagogue and didn't have the necessary 10 men needed for a minyan- the quorum needed for a communal prayer service.

Still, Paul and his companions persevered in their work of preaching and ministering to this small group of potential Christians. But as they did so they were followed around by a slave woman who was a fortuneteller. Now this woman made a great deal of money for her owners by telling fortunes. But when she followed Paul and his companions she would cry out "These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." After a while this annoyed Paul, so, exasperated, he called the demon out of the woman. However, once this demon had left the woman she was no longer able to tell fortunes, and that was a source of financial loss to her owners. Because of this Paul and Silas were brought to the authorities in the market square. They were accused of "disturbing the city by advocating customs that were not lawful for Romans to adopt or observe".

So the result was a brutal flogging for Paul and Silas and then they were thrown into prison. They were likely placed in a cold dark cell with their feet in stocks and indeed positioned in such a way as to cause maximum pain.

So what do we learn of their behavior in that prison cell? They must've been hurting, they must've been in physical pain and yet their belief and faith was such that they were praying and singing hymns to God. The other prisoners were listening to them. What do you think they were thinking? Rather than being afraid, they turned their hearts and their minds, and their voices to praising God. And it was that same faith that allowed them to stay in prison

after an earthquake had opened the doors and unfastened their chains. Interestingly, not only Paul and Silas remained in the prison, but the other prisoners as well. Perhaps the faith Paul and Silas showed had worked, had done its work in the heart of the other prisoners. Certainly it worked in the heart of the guard. He had planned to kill himself to avoid terrible punishment for failing at his job but when he saw that the prisoners were all still there he lost his fear - came to trust God - and asked to be baptized as a Christian that very night.

So Paul and Silas acted not from fear, but from faith, and it was those actions that the guard, and I'm sure many other prisoners, saw that drew them to becoming Christians.

The reading from John, today's gospel reading, touches in part on the same things. The passage is from Maundy Thursday when Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Gethsemane. This is Jesus's prayer to God for his disciples. He's asking God for his grace not only on behalf of the disciples but on behalf of those who will believe in him through their words. Through their words they will bring others to become Christians and to know Christ and God. Lucy Lind Hogan Professor Emerita of Preaching and Worship at Wesley Theological Seminary, wrote in a homily, "It is crucial for us today to return to Jesus's prayer, for it describes his hope, his vision and his picture of what we, his followers are to look like, and how we are to live our lives together."

What we his followers are to look like, and how we are to live our lives together - could it be that he is describing what is to be our habitus?

Today's reading from Revelation gives us hope. It reads "it is I, Jesus , who sent my angel to you, with this testimony, for the churches. I am ... the bright morning star. ... And let everyone who hears, say "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift." How clear an invitation to live our lives according to Christ's joy and generosity.

So what does this mean for us? What is our habitus? We are here this morning practicing our faith and that's a good start. We're here for different reasons - some of us are here for guidance and spiritual refreshment, others for the opportunity to pray in a close-knit community, maybe others because we have a really great coffee hour. But our presence here indicates the importance of God in our lives.

We are at a church that prioritizes giving to others. Many of us feel that that is one of the factors that defines us as a parish. Hopefully that informs our personal habitus.

Jesus taught: care for the poor, feed the hungry, support the prisoners, loan without expectation of interest, turn the other cheek when struck.

These are hard actions when you stop to think about them and ask what they mean to you.

Do they impell you to take action for social justice? To question actions by our own government which may result in children going hungry and families unable to put food on the table.

Do they encourage you to participate in social welfare services provided by local charities?

To help them provide warm clothing or a night's rest for the weary?

Or do these words of Jesus simply prompt you to write a check - which sometimes is all we can do?

What habitus would you have to show to others that you are truly a Christian?

On Palm Sunday, if the weather is nice, we process outside from the parish porch to the door of the church and I often think that someone driving by might find this attractive, might find his or her self gently pulled to this church. A couple of weeks ago at the parish dance a member of the temple down the street, Temple Beth Torah, stopped by my table to chat and said "This is such a good church". I think that says some thing about our habitus and how we are perceived - by at least one member of a different faith community.

Now we can all be much better Christians, but if we think about how our behavior speaks to others, and what an incredible impact it could have, then we are encouraged to be better witnesses for Christ.

And what about that fear which is the opposite of faith? These are difficult, divisive times and there may be much that is going on that is frightening. It is important to take action when it seems appropriate to us, but it is also important to trust in God's continuing care and love for us.

Do you remember that hymn, "And They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love?" Be brave in your faith and consciously cultivate a habitus which shows how a true Christian lives. A habitus which shows true Christian love.

Amen