

Easter 6-C
May 26, 2019
St. John's Cathedral

I just got back yesterday from several days in the Chicago suburbs to celebrate my granddaughter Kendall's high school graduation. This is definitely the season for this wonderful rite of passage. My granddaughter, Ally, in Seattle, will also be graduating in about three weeks.

There were about 600 graduates in Kendall's class, a long parade of green-gowned kids marching across the football field to receive their diplomas. They are on the brink of something new – college, or vocational training, or joining the workforce, or entering the military, taking a gap year or exploring other options. Things are going to change for sure.

We heard a few speeches, too. By graduates, the principal and a member of the school board. And there was a common denominator: This is the time to step out. You are ready. You've been prepared, so let's get on with it.

As I took all of this in from my seat in the bleachers, I saw some connections to both our gospel reading and the rhythm of this Easter season that has been with us now for six weeks. It, too, is about being on the brink of something. (As an aside, our book group this spring is reading "On the Brink of Everything," by Parker Palmer. That expression 'on the brink' has found a home in my consciousness because of the energy and suspense that it seems to have. We need to be on the brink from time to time!)

The first connector is today's gospel from the fifth chapter of John where Jesus visited a pool in Jerusalem where people sought to be healed in its waters. You get a picture of the

number of people and the severity of their conditions. Many who wanted to be healed gathered in the area around this pool, waiting their turn to enter the water. Some were blind, some were paralyzed, some were crippled, we are told. They spread out among five porticoes—a large area.

Jesus went up to a man who had been there for 38 years and asked him if he wanted to get well. This man didn't answer with a simple yes, or no, but instead described all of the reasons why he hadn't been healed – He doesn't have anyone to put him in the water at the right time – or he can't get to the water when it is rippled – the time it is thought to be most effective. The system clearly was not working for him. So Jesus simply tells him to pick up his bedroll and start walking. And he did, walking away a healed man.

As so often is the case in stories like this, we have no idea what this man did once he was enabled to leave this pool where he had been returning 38 years, unable to walk. We don't know if or how his life changed. He never really says he wants to be healed. There is also no mention of faith or trust. And he doesn't even remember who healed him when he is asked, since Jesus had disappeared into the crowd. Only later does he see Jesus in the temple and recognizes him. (And then Jesus gets in trouble for healing him on the sabbath.)

But he is healed. Enabled, by the power of God, to get on with his life in a new way if he chooses. He could be on the brink of something.

Another seasonal thread is the rhythm Easter season itself. We are closing in on Ascension day, celebrated this coming Thursday. As we've moved through this Easter season up to now, we've heard about the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples. He is alive, but in a different kind of way that allows him to show up unexpectedly in all kinds of places.

He visited the disciples in a locked room where he showed them his hands and his side – proof that he was alive and among them. When Thomas, at first reluctant to believe that this had happened, saw Jesus he proclaimed, ‘My Lord and my God.’

Jesus showed up on the beach as the disciples went fishing, gave them some good advice about changing their strategy (throw the net on the other side of the boat) and then, after they caught a huge net full of fish, shared breakfast with them. In a reading we don’t hear in this year’s Sunday lectionary, some walked along on the road to Emmaus with a stranger, who, when they stopped to have a meal, proved to be Jesus as they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

All of these encounters and others, strengthened and encouraged them – equipped them to move ahead as they and other followers of Jesus began to grow into a community of faith that would spread through the region and emerge as the first expressions of the Church.

But the time came for those kinds of encounters to end as Jesus ascended to heaven to join his Father. This is described in both the book of Acts and in Luke’s gospel (in slightly different ways). In Acts, Jesus, before he leaves them, tells his disciples that they will be empowered to carry on his work and witness by the Holy Spirit – that manifestation of the Spirit that we celebrate on the feast of Pentecost (which we celebrate two weeks from now).

Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. And the disciples looked on, necks craned, and watched him disappear.

Jesus' ascension is not abandonment, but a hopeful and empowering moment. Perhaps one that helps them to know that they are ready and equipped to move on – to take responsibility for this important work of teaching, preaching, healing, giving hope, gathering community. They are on the brink of something new.

About 15 years ago I was in England at Coventry Cathedral on Ascension day and there at a celebration of the Eucharist attended mostly by children at their day school – kids between 6 and 12 years old. The priest who was preaching really hammered away on one important point – That Jesus doesn't leave us entirely, but does leave us with important responsibilities. That Jesus kind of hands these things off to us, no matter our age -- Things like that commitment to share the good news, to offer compassion, to seek peace, to live faithfully and prayerfully, to take risks for the gospel. And that he has prepared us for those responsibilities.

This priest preached from one of those high pulpits with a kind of tall, winding stairway to get up there. As he finished his sermon, he climbed down dramatically, one step at a time from that high place, then paused a moment and dashed back up the stairs to share one more thought. Then he did it again, and a third time. By the time he actually finished that sermon, those children (and the rest of us) knew firmly that Jesus trusted us to carry on his work in the world – and the Spirit would be our helper. We were all on the brink of taking this on.

Mary Oliver, in her poem "The Summer Day" (which like a lot of her poetry is as much prayer as poetry) concludes, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

That's probably a good question for graduates at all levels of education (although it might not be answered fully until much later in life). It's a good Easter season question for us as well-- at any stage of life as we ponder to what we are called by God. As we ponder how Jesus both equips us and empowers us to carry on the joys and challenges of our faith. As Jesus hands off the responsibility for ministry.

As we live on the brink of those holy moments and sacred opportunities to live what we believe – to live this one wild and precious life.