



The Apostle Peter as depicted by Peter Paul Rubens

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1st Peter 2:10)

What makes disparate persons into a people? Apparently, it is the realization that mercy has been granted them. And, of course without adversity mercy cannot be.

My wife Donna is part Saratown Indian. Her tribe was perhaps part of the Lumbee Indians about which Josephine Humphries from my home state of South Carolina writes in her wonderful book *Nowhere Else on Earth*. The Lumbees, like many North Carolina tribes who suffered such trials as “The Trail of Tears” surely knew adversity. And thus, they became a people, for they knew the thirst for mercy.

Henry V was certainly under this impression as he defines what it is to be his brother when on St. Crispian’s Day, October 25, 1415 before the Battle of Agincourt, William Shakespeare has the King proclaim: “This story shall the good man teach his son; And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by, from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered—we few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he to-day that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother.”

Yes, it is apparently the crucible of adversity which molds disparate men and women into a people. For only when delivered from extreme adversity can the human heart come to truly recognize mercy.

The passage I chose for the Easter Lesson from Acts is the choosing of the first 7 Deacons of the Church. This decision was made by the early Church because a subset of the believers, the Widow of the Grecian Gentile Converts were being shortchanged in the daily distribution. So The Twelve, who had already suffered their share of adversity – thank you very much – realized the need to show mercy. And thus these 7 men in whom the Holy Spirit was especially strong were ordained – set apart – to show special mercy to these women who were experiencing adversity. And with this act of mercy, the new Christian Church is reinforced and strengthened so as to become not just individuals who share an evening meal, but a people who have learned to trust and depend on each other and Love’s Lord.

The Psalm for today includes Jesus’ lament on the Cross, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Ps.31:5a) No other part of the entire psalter expresses a more sturdy trust in the Lord when faced with horrific adversity.

The heart of the Psalm itself, verses 9 through 18 are the desperate thirst for God’s mercy “Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress.” Yes, it is the dispensation of mercy by which God binds his children to him and makes us his people.

In the Gospel passage today we have this rather petulant demand by Philip, who is the “Eyore” of the Apostles, always providing the note of somber worry and frustration. Like Eyore, Philip seems to suffer from the condition known as “Anhedonia,” the inability to experience optimism. In John 14, Jesus gives us some of the most comforting verses in all of Scripture, starting with “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” But Philip says, “Show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”... “Conjure up the Lord God Jesus, and I guess that will have to be enough to console us.” After all he’s done for The Twelve, after three years of being in his presence, can you imagine how Jesus’ heart must have dropped in his chest when Philip said that? Yet, Jesus doesn’t become angry, or frustrated, or resentful with Philip, but finally tells him, “Well, Philip, if you don’t believe me because I say that I and the Father are one, then at least believe me on the basis of the things you have witnessed me do.” (See Jn.14:9-11) You see, even in his final evening among his friends, when he was getting ready to begin the long walk of agony, when faced with this moment of disbelief from one of The Twelve, Our Lord still show loving mercy in the face of pain. And Philip would need to finally discover his own reservoir of mercy. For, by ancient church tradition, Philip would be tortured and martyred in Hieropolis, near the present-day Turkish City of Denizli.

We say every Sunday in the words of the Nicene Creed that we believe in an Apostolic Church. But few people have even thought about what that really means. Of course, it should mean among other things that we believe in the teaching of the Apostles, the original Disciples of Christ. But what is it that marks a tradition, or a teaching, or a life-style as “Apostolic?” It is, more than anything else, the practice of boundless mercy; of dispensing love in the face of hatred, tolerance when confronted with bias, patience when badly handled with angry abuse. When in adversity, we receive from God the deliverance that we have not earned, then we must come to the place of doing likewise. Or, paraphrasing Richard Rohr, “When we realize we have fallen into the ocean of God’s mercy, we stop measuring our own forgiveness by the cupful.”

Yes, it’s true. We are a chosen people, you and I, a people belonging to God. We have been forged together into a victorious band of brothers, not because of the blood that we have or might one day shed, but instead because of the precious blood that has been shed for us. And this is how we recognize that identity as God’s people, because we have come to know with certainty that we have received his mercy. JWB+ 5/13/17