

September 13, 2020 15th Sunday after Pentecost Sermon notes

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

In her first charge to the Synod of the Diocese of Algoma in 2017 Archbishop Germond provided an image of a sacred bundle. These were things that a nomadic people would carry with them in order to remind themselves of the important things from their history and the attitudes and beliefs that bind them together. The 'seeds in the sacred bundle' for the Diocese of Algoma were: "Discipleship, Reconciliation, Stewardship, and Community Building" and have been used to keep us focused as we journey together as the people of God. Our journey has been a challenging one, particularly over the past few months, but we do continue to journey with God and each other even when we can't gather together. In today's set of readings we travel with the escaping people of God during the Exodus from Egypt as they encounter a major obstacle. We also hear St. Paul urge his readers in Rome to foster a level of community that allows for individual interpretation of God's commands while remaining committed to Christ. And we hear one of Jesus' parables urging us all to remember that 'we are to forgive as we have been forgiven' in all sorts of circumstances. As I have reflected on these passages from our sacred book I have been reminded of the need to care for and nurture those seeds in our sacred bundle. May the words which follow bring us all closer to God through his Messiah Jesus.

Discipleship is the task of following a leader in order to become more like the leader and it was to be the process through which the people of God were led by Moses. They showed their willingness to follow instructions during the Passover meal so that everyone remained safe and they followed Moses out from the only homes they knew on this grand adventure. They met with their first major obstacle when they came to the water. The cloud of God's presence was still indicating they were on the right path but they could go no further. In addition, judging from the clouds of dust behind them, the Egyptian army was on their way to announce a change of plans. Anyone who has met with an obstacle in their path while following God can completely identify with the feelings of the descendants of Abraham in that moment. There are times when, as a disciple, the path before you seems more difficult than you thought it would be. The natural human reaction is to wail but Moses held out another option. "13But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." (Exodus 14:13,14) So, these new disciples of Yahweh watched in wonder as the waters parted and the Egyptian army was thwarted all by the hand of the God they were following. A stupendous event that became part of their story - one of the seeds in their traveling bundle - and would bring encouragement and hope into their future.

We certainly aren't facing the same kind of challenge as disciples but we know of the realities of obstacles. We can feel that God has abandoned us or has tricked us into this disaster but none of that is true. God is faithful to God's promises and motivated solely by love. To think otherwise is to show our misunderstanding of God and God's Messiah. If we have been following faithfully and we run into an obstacle that seems insurmountable I believe we need to listen again to Moses: 'do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you'. When faced with a global pandemic we are simply asked to do what we can to not be afraid, to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayer, and wait to see what God will do. Learning to trust our God in all circumstances is part of the task of a disciple and it is one of the important aspects of our lives together.

Another of the identifying seeds in our Diocesan Sacred Bundle is the seed of Community Building. There are actions that assist in this process and actions that make the process more difficult or even impossible. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, outlines some important aspects of community building namely that each of us is accountable to God as followers of Jesus Christ. We are to, as our teachers used to say, 'keep our eyes on our own paper'. This seems a strange idea when we are speaking about building community but granting to others the freedom and responsibility to come to their own conclusions is what we hope others will do for us. If, in my private devotions, I believe God is asking me to do something specific I would hope that my brothers and sisters in Christ would allow me to follow that path without undue criticism. Once again this idea confronts the regular practice that takes place on social media platforms every day. Please don't misunderstand me in this - I'm not speaking against the platforms themselves but the way people sometimes use them. It is not a community building exercise to publicly shame someone for a comment or a decision. The person making that statement which we may feel is foolish, is accountable to God just as much we are accountable for any reaction we give. "Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" (Rom 14:1) means finding ways to honour the decisions people make for themselves while staying true to the decisions we feel are right and asking Gods' Holy Spirit to continue the process of community building. Build up rather than tear down is the advice we hear in the letter to the Ephesians about this and is at the heart of what St. Paul is trying to say to his readers in Rome and to us.

The seed of Reconciliation is another part of our Sacred Bundle and at its heart is the attitude brought to light by the question Simon Peter asked and the illustrating parable Jesus told in answer. The size of the forgiveness we offer should always be judged by the size of the forgiveness we have received from God's hand. Whenever we are discussing our need to forgive someone we need to have in mind

how much we have been forgiven and allow that truth to dictate our reaction. In the parable Jesus told he uses units of measurement which may not be familiar to you so let me say that a 'denarius' was a coin that was used to pay a labourer for a day's work. A 'talent' was an amount of money equal to about 15 years of wages. So, while Jesus may have been exaggerating for the purposes of his parable, the point is that the first slave was forgiven a huge debt but would not forgive the relatively small debt which was owed to him by the second slave. Forgiveness and reconciliation must always be done with the awareness of how much each of us has been forgiven by God. The first slave could not hope to repay his debt just as we can not hope to ever earn God's favour or repay the debt we owe to our Creator. But, just like the master in the story, God wipes the slate clean out of love and mercy and sets us free from any possible punishment. So, as Simon Peter asked, "how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me, as many as 7 times?" In a sense Jesus answered, as many times as you have been forgiven by your Father in heaven. This particular seed in our Sacred Bundle challenges us to grow in our awareness of the forgiveness of God that we have received.

This journey we are on will continue and the God whom we worship has promised to accompany us all the way. He invites us to grow in discipleship by becoming more aware of the many ways in which he guards and protects us. By growing in trust of God's provision and faithfulness we will become better and more able disciples of God and God's Messiah. He invites us to treat others in the way we wish to be treated by allowing them to live in accordance with what their relationship with God dictates to them. We are fellow travelers on a journey where building one another up is a much better choice than tearing each other down. The Holy Spirit of God will lead each of us individually to the Father in heaven to whom we are each accountable. As we do this our community of faith will become an even more welcoming place and the atmosphere will help the appropriate level of growth to take place within our community. And God invites us to become even more aware of how much love and forgiveness has been poured upon us from our Father in heaven and allow that knowledge to inform our decisions about the forgiveness we offer to others. God's love is so amazing and God's forgiveness so utterly astounding that any limit we have placed on the number of times we offer forgiveness will be removed as we contemplate the love and forgiveness we have received at God's hand.

As we continue to face obstacles and opportunities for rejoicing I pray that God's Holy Spirit will draw us closer to Jesus and each other even if we are forced to travel apart. May the seeds in our sacred bundle: discipleship, stewardship, reconciliation, and community building continue to assist us to keep walking in the way of life.