

DRAWN TO THE LIGHT

John 3: 12-21

[Easter 2, 6 April 2016, Augsburg College Chapel]

- In these early days after Easter, I often find myself imagining the experience of the 1st century disciples of Jesus after the provocative events of the past few days. The betrayals and denials, the wrenching crucifixion, the reports of an empty tomb, the appearances in upper rooms and along the road – the fear, the doubt, the loss, the confusion about what will happen now. And I wonder what we 21st century disciples might learn from these experiences 2000 years ago as we reflect once again on our lives of faith? What do Mary and Thomas and Peter and James and John, among the saints of our faith, have to teach us about what we are called to do here and now? Are there saints in our midst today who continue to teach us the way of faith?
- It is intriguing to have these verses from John's gospel assigned for the Wednesday of this second week in Easter – familiar verses for many of us, verses captured in a gospel written decades after the events in Jerusalem that we remember in Holy Week and Easter, and verses that remind us that the early faithful looked back on Jesus's teaching and ministry as a pattern for their lives as they sought to live as his disciples in the world.
- Let's take a look at the logic of these verses. First, he challenges them (and us) to believe in him so that we might have life abundant and eternal. It begins with faith. Second, he proclaims the central message of our faith that our God sent God's only Son into the midst of human history so that the world God loves so very much might be redeemed. It is grounded in God's love for the world. And finally, Jesus calls us to be drawn to the light, to what is true, to lives and deeds done in God. It is about living as those who love the light and aren't afraid to have their deeds known before each other and our God.
- Saved through faith, called into the world God loves, challenged to be God's light in all we do – here is a pattern for the life of discipleship, here is what it means to live as Easter people, people of the resurrection.
- This Eastertide I am mindful of how important it is to find in our own 21st century lives those who have followed this pattern and who show in their lives what it means to follow Jesus – where are our 21st century saints and what lessons do we learn from them about discipleship? I've got a few lessons and saints in mind...
- *Nobody said it would be easy.* This is such a tough message for all of us – especially for young people. In a world where our national character is marked by inequality and greed and fear, how can we expect to overcome the sense of entitlement that invades all aspects of our personal and public lives? I deserve that scholarship, that car, that job, that relationship, that stock option, that respect... When I am asked to offer my understanding of vocation, I always include the fact that it may be sacrificial – and I've had students tell me how helpful it is to consider that we may be called to places and challenges unknown and daunting. It may not be easy, though the world would have us believe

otherwise. The early disciples accepted the call, and though I imagine they had their share of doubts along the way, they did what Jesus called them to do – to continue a ministry of healing and compassion, to share the good news, to live as those who love the light. The way of discipleship, the German theologian and World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us, is “costly.” The cross is more than a symbol of our faith – it is a way of faithful and joyful living – and nobody said it would be easy.

- Recently I learned that 2016 marks the 25th anniversary of a man whose name we all know, but whose story we may not – a man who understood that it wasn’t always easy to live faithfully in the world. That man is Brian Coyle, after whom the Brian Coyle Community Center down the street is named. Brian Coyle was born in 1944. He was active in the anti-war movement in the 1960s – he resisted the draft. In 1971, Brian Coyle “came out” as a gay man – certainly a courageous stance at that time in our history. He was resilient and persistent in all he did in his life. He ran for public office and after several tries was elected to the Minneapolis City Council in 1983, one of the first openly gay elected officials in the country. Brian Coyle became a voice for the disenfranchised in our city – immigrants and refugees, people in poverty, people of color, people of diverse sexual and gender identities and orientations. In 1991, Brian Coyle was diagnosed with the AIDS virus, and died a few months later. His funeral was held at Wesley Church in downtown Minneapolis, a choice he made so that his family and friends would know that there was one church in our city that would accept a gay man who had died of AIDS. As our neighbor, Pastor Greg Renstrom, has written “Even in dying, he lived for others. That is a saintly life. Brian Coyle was a saint.” We celebrate that saintly life today and in the months ahead as we recall the lessons Brian Coyle taught us about discipleship, lessons that draw us to the light.
- *Keep your faith and keep your wits.* This is the stuff of patience, which may be the most essential skill for faithful living in the world – and the early disciples surely were role models of patience. Why didn’t they just run away and save themselves? I imagine they may have had that temptation, but they took up their work and the rest is history. Surely patience is a trait not always valued in our culture today. We’re in a perpetual hurry, lamenting a lack of time, never catching up, cutting corners to get ahead. And we’re called to pay attention to God’s time, to the arc and horizon of God’s love breaking in again and again to our lives in the world. We’re called to keep our faith – and our wits – by being patient and watching for what God is doing and calls to us do as God’s people.
- I have been thinking about this lesson a good bit recently as I consider the example of our friend (and Augsburg graduate), Martin Sabo, whose remarkable career of public service was celebrated just a couple of weeks ago at his funeral. How did he do it over the almost 50 years he served in public office? Surely he models a life of patience for all of us. Those of us who had the privilege to know him know that he listened carefully, he discussed and reflected, he waited for wisdom and insight, he prayed and worshipped, he considered the wider context and important relationships, he was not afraid to take an unpopular position if it is in pursuit of the greater good. He made our world a better place.

Now I don't imagine Martin would appreciate comparison to the early disciples – he was the consummate modest Norwegian-American – but I believe that his example of faithful living, pointing to the One who was to come, coupled with his intentional living, keeping his wits, if you will, as he doggedly went about his daily business, helps us to understand what it means to be patient. And Martin is a modern-day witness to how faithful and intentional living – the stuff of patience – is the essential skill for our lives in the world, as we are drawn to the light.

- *Turn, turn, turn because God's love is breaking in again and again.* And here then is the call all of us must heed as people of faith, saints and sinners called to be God's people and do God's work in the world. The late Lutheran theologian and preacher, Joseph Sittler, once said that the whole of the Christian life is summed up in the liturgical formula, "O God, from whom no secrets are hid." Wow. That is a more than ever relevant message for all of us. Your God knows you – your God has named you – your God loves you – no secrets are hidden from God's loving gaze. Turn away from your sins because life abundant is yours through the graceful gift of faith, ours in the Easter promise. You are my beloved, our God says, turn to me and all things will be new.
- These then are the lessons of Eastertide – 2000 years ago as much as today: To pay attention to a God who knows us so well – who knows it won't be easy, who knows we will struggle to keep our faith and our wits, who knows how difficult it is to turn away from our comfortable lives – and because God knows us, God does not leave us alone.
- This Eastertide, may we pursue God's work for our time, may we pay attention to the ways in which we are called to love each other and all of creation, again and again. It is our Easter call. Shall we pay attention together – pay attention to the needs of the world – pay attention for peace, for our children, for a living wage, for Black lives, for a world that hungers no more, for justice in the land, for a sustainable earth, for common purpose? Will you pay attention and give up your comfort and safety – perhaps even your life – to do God's will? There is work to be done, a promise to be fulfilled, life abundant to know and enjoy.
- God sends us God's only Son. Then God sends us the early disciples, the saints of the ages, and the saints of our time like Brian Coyle and Martin Sabo and countless other faithful witnesses whose lives draw us to the light. And then God sends us, this community of faithful brothers and sister, to bear testimony to the light, the love of God breaking into our world with words and deeds of faith and hope and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.