May 17, 2015 – 7th Sunday in Easter

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When I was in my early twenties, I read the book, *In This House of Brede*, by the English author, Rumer Godden. It’s the story of a sophisticated and successful business woman named Philippa Gregory, who decides to leave the world and join a cloistered Benedictine convent. At the time I read it, I had drifted away from the Episcopal Church and I was trying to figure out where God fit into my life, if at all. I was also, as many 20-somethings do, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life, and I wasn’t having much luck at that.

So along comes this book about leaving the world behind and spending life praying and reading, and maybe working in an herb garden, and it sounded SO appealing! I was ready to run off to the nearest convent, only, not being Roman Catholic, and in the days before the Internet, I didn’t know how to find one and the impulse passed. Thankfully!

But now, more than ever, the desire to just put the whole world and its problems behind us still has its allure. Our world is so complex, and there are so many choices out there, good and bad, that it’s almost paralyzing.

Here’s a true confession. Long before I was ever called to the priesthood, maybe even during this time of questioning that I’m talking about, I used to think that it would be nice to be a priest because then people would expect you to be religious. They wouldn’t question your choices or criticize you for your faith. It would be SO much easier to be a Christian if I were a priest.

Ha, ha, joke’s on me! In some ways it IS easier, for all those reasons I mentioned, but there are some trade-offs that they didn’t tell us about in Seminary. But that’s not what this sermon is about, so ask me later if you’re curious.

Our Gospel passage today is the very last part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. It’s sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer, because it’s Jesus’s prayer to his Father on behalf of his disciples. His intercession is all about us, his disciples, being in the world without his physical presence to guide them. Jesus is not talking about us escaping from the world and its problems. He’s talking about being IN the world but not being consumed by it. This prayer is Jesus asking God to protect us from the world and from the evil one while we carry on with his work here.

So why do we need protecting? Here are some clues from the text:

*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one*

*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

*But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.*

*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.*

*They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

We need protecting from those things in the world that would destroy our unity and our joy in Christ, and stop our efforts on behalf of others – the world’s hatred for us. We need protecting from the things that would pull us back under the world’s influence rather than under the influence of God’s love.

This past March, the Church celebrated the feast day of Oscar Romero. Father Romero was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War. Because of his outspokenness against the revolutionary government’s terrible repression and violation of human rights, he was assassinated while at the altar celebrating the Mass, on March 24, 1980. This is from a speech he gave on February 2, 1980, less than two months before he was killed:

“In less than three years, more than fifty priests have been attacked, threatened, calumniated. Six are already martyrs--they were murdered. Some have been tortured and others expelled [from the country]. Nuns have also been persecuted. The archdiocesan radio station and educational institutions that are Catholic or of a Christian inspiration have been attacked, threatened, intimidated, even bombed. Several parish communities have been raided. If all this has happened to persons who are the most evident representatives of the Church, you can guess what has happened to ordinary Christians, to the campesinos, catechists, lay ministers, and to the ecclesial base communities. There have been threats, arrests, tortures, murders, numbering in the hundreds and thousands....

But it is important to note why [the Church] has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. That part of the church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people's defense. Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the church: the poor.”

This is why we need God’s protection. The world doesn’t like people who shake up the status quo. Oscar Romero’s is a pretty extreme example. I don’t expect that we’ll be gunned down while attending church, or at least I hope not. But I repeat, the world doesn’t like – in fact, HATES – people who shake up the status quo.

And what is that status quo these days? We’re not in the middle of a revolutionary junta in this country, at least not yet. But we have plenty of poor people, whose basic rights are being repressed and violated, and who find it hard just to get the basics of life.

Even before creating the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which we debate about so much in this country today, the founding fathers, in their Declaration of Independence, said straight out: “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These are things that poor people can’t afford. And many of our politicians and the corporations and political action committees who fund them don’t want to or can’t seem to change that status quo.

But this is what we, the Church, are being called to do. Love God and love your neighbors. Feed God’s sheep. Whatever you do for the least of your brothers and sisters, you do for Jesus. Jesus knew if his followers did these things that they would be attacked and persecuted, but he wants us to do them anyway.

This is not an easy task. Following Jesus means following him to the Cross. But he calls us to do just that, and promises us that God will be with us and protect us.

So how do we do that? How do we follow Jesus’ example and teachings in the face of the world’s disapproval and even persecution? Well first of all, we can’t and shouldn’t do it alone. We need God and we need each other. Together we can make a difference in people’s lives. Together we can shine the love of Jesus into the darkness of the world.

But, maybe more urgently, WHY should we do this? Why should we face discomfort and persecution when we could be safe and comfortable? Why should we give our hard-earned money and stuff to people who maybe don’t deserve it? Well, no matter what I say, that’s really between your conscience and God. I could glibly say, “We should do these things because Jesus tells us to,” but those are empty words unless a person truly believes that.

But I will tell you that true joy comes from giving and from serving. The kind of joy that can’t come from another car or a fancy vacation.

*I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.*

Joy. The Greek word for joy is *chara*. It means joy in the sense of the awareness of God's favor, or grace recognized. It comes from the same root as the word *charis*, which means grace, as a gift or blessing brought to us by Jesus Christ; and *charisma*, which means a gift of grace that divinely empowers a believer to share God's work with others

We are guaranteed Jesus’s presence with us always, the Holy Spirit’s guidance and comfort, and the protection of God no matter what we do. But if we follow Jesus, if we pour out ourselves on those in need, we are also guaranteed joy. Let’s not hide from the world. Together, as a sanctified people just as Jesus is sanctified, let’s go out into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. And let our joy be complete in serving others.

Amen.