

Pentecost V

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 10: 22

...Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Romans 5: 2

Many of you know that this passage from Romans is perhaps my very favorite in all Scripture. I love many Gospel stories and biblical characters, but if I had to take with me to a desert island just one verse from Scripture, I believe this would be it.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. What other sentence expresses and explains so succinctly and so eloquently the triumph of the human spirit though *troubles, toils and snares*? All of us, I am sure, know people whose lives this passage describes absolutely: people who have endured trials and afflictions of unfathomable dimensions, and yet who have emerged strong, healed, and grateful. The workings of the Spirit in their lives are mysterious but undeniable; their hope and faith bear witness. They are our inspiration, the proof, if we need it, that *with God all things are possible*.

This week I spent a night up in Byfield, at Adelynrood, the Episcopal retreat center there. Adelynrood is run by the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, a worldwide order of lay people – almost all women– who have a ministry of intercessory prayer. Adelynrood is in tranquil woodsy setting with lovely grounds, impeccable gardens, and old camp-style buildings which are, however, quite comfortable. I go once each year to celebrate a midweek Eucharist for the small band of companions who will be there, spending prayerful time in this community of sanctuary and offering hospitality to the various groups who come through for programs and retreats.

I've been going to Adelynrood for 25 years, I reckon – to programs and ordained women's retreats, sometimes visiting with my mother, who is a Companion herself although no longer active, and in recent years to celebrate the Eucharist and preach. My time there always feels like a homecoming, a gift, and a mini-retreat for me.

And this week is Pride. Yesterday was the big day, and yesterday was also the anniversary of the day a year ago when we finally, and I hope permanently, God willing, secured marriage equality in the Commonwealth for good and all. So I've been reflecting on that long and sometimes intense struggle.

I've been seeing my life in ministry this week in a kind of spectrum; on one end, if you will, my reflective time with the little group of women at Adelynrood, on the other, giving a speech or prayer to a crowd of hundreds in the Great Hall at the State House when we had won, or lost, a vote in the legislature, or marching with those hundred other clergy across the Common to the Statehouse last June 14th singing We Shall Overcome. From contemplative to active, from intimate to public.

One of the women at Adelynrood the other day stood out as a bit of a rogue. Many of these ladies adhere to the old ways of the place: they wear white outfits and speak in somewhat hushed tones – make no mistake, they are not old-fashioned in their thinking, but they observe certain traditional customs of the retreat house. This one, however, tended to shorts and tank tops and bare feet and loud opinions. I sat next to her at dinner and she regaled me with stories of various rectors at her parish (in Provincetown.) She said she had told one of them “ You can only do three things that I can't do, so get off your high horse about being a priest.” And more along those lines.

In my homily the next morning I told the women that I came every year with one main message on my heart for them: gratitude for their ministry of prayer and sanctuary. I said, talking about the lessons for the day, which celebrated Barnabas and talked about each disciple giving according to his or her ability, that we all had different gifts. I said that I do not have much of a gift for the contemplative life, that I am an activist, and that I need their prayers and support to do the work I do – which I talked about just a bit. I said, and all this is very true – that the renewal and refreshment I receive from my time there each year is out of all proportion to the hours spent. That I am somehow able to unload my griefs and worries, to partake of the tranquil spirituality and beauty that pervades the place, and return to my own ministry with a new heart and new spirit.

Afterwards, as we were waiting for breakfast, the vociferous woman from P'town announced to the group, “I've just realized that this is the big Fowler!” I must have looked perplexed. At Adelynrood, my mother has always been the big Fowler. “You know, the important Fowler!” she went on. *Excuse me?* I said. “You know, your name *does get mentioned,*” she told me.

“Well,” I said, “when the rector in Wellfleet called me several years ago to ask me to come and preach there, he did introduce himself by saying he had seen me on t.v. in his gym in P'town. That was kind of a unique opening line.”

So I spent some time thinking about that interchange, and about being the big Fowler. And what I know, and what I want to say to all of you, is that to the extent my

name does get mentioned, to the extent that I have helped to achieve anything big or important, it is because of all of you, and with all of you. I am in no way big or important by myself; if I have contributed something to the struggle for equality and justice in the church and the wider world it is because I carry all of you with me wherever I go.

I've had my own suffering and struggles, it's true, and I do believe that in my own life suffering has created endurance, and – *I pray*– character and – *I know*– hope. But more critically, I have heard *your* own stories, listened to *your* own suffering, marveled at *your* own endurance and *your* characters, thanked God for *your* hope, and I carry that witness with me always.

And to me, that's what my priesthood means, above all else. So while technically it's true that I can only do 2 or 3 things that any lay person is not qualified for, in the eyes of the church, my role as *representative* is what I feel makes me specialized – not special, but specialized – and gives me whatever weight and significance I have in the world.

And thinking about this has given me some deeper insight into the recent Democratic primary campaign. I got into an argument with friend of mine a couple of weeks ago about why Obama needs to be called Black. She was objecting strongly to this: *he's half Black and half White*, she said, *why do we have to emphasize the Black?* I said a couple of things, one, that we do not yet live in a post-racial world, much as we might like to, and the world we live in identifies him as Black. Two, that Obama self—identifies as Black, and it's only respectful to honor that identification. And three, that it's a political choice Obama has to make – if he'd tried to avoid or deny his Black heritage, he wouldn't have gotten to first base as a credible candidate.

But I think the most important and profound answer- which of course I only thought of later, is that Black Americans – and probably many Black folk all over the world, *need* Obama to be Black, to identify as Black, to represent them as a Black American, an African American. That makes him theirs; they can claim him

And it helps me to understand why Hillary hung in there as long as she did. I got a little tired of her tenacity, I admit, and I think she stayed in partly through the influence of some of her darker angels. But on the other hand, as she said in her big and generous speech last Saturday, she also stayed in for those 18 million voters for whom she was the woman candidate, and not only *the* woman, but *their* woman. She carried all those voters with her, their suffering, their endurance, their character and hope, just as Obama carries the suffering, the endurance, the character, and the hope, of so many millions, and so many generations, of African Americans.

So I can understand Hillary's endurance in carrying on, carrying all those others with her. I understand her stubbornness. I have often said that the greatest gift I've had to offer St John's over the years is *my* stubbornness, my refusal to quit when the going gets tough. And I don't mean to be self-deprecating when I say this. St John's had a quite a history of priests not sticking around for more than a couple of years, and it took a long time for the parish to recover from that, to gain a sense of being worth someone's while to stick around for.

And that stubbornness, or endurance – or perhaps we could call it faithfulness, as well, has been a gift to me as well. Because the struggle and endurance have formed me, have created character, have made me the priest I am today, the one who carries you all with me so that altogether we can, we pray, do God's work in the world. And so I say again, if I have been part of anything big or important, and I do believe that the achievement of marriage equality is big, and is important – we have been part of that all together.

We are doing a lot of good singing today, songs of struggle and songs of justice. Songs that recall the battle for marriage equality, and other battles for social justice and human rights throughout the centuries. And as we sing, we turn our faces toward the Holy One in whose name we suffer and struggle and endure and hope. And we do not sing alone, we notice others singing with us. Our neighbors sing with us, and we sing with them. In the midst of hymning prayer and praise, our distinctions and differences disappear, our sorrows fade momentarily away, and we join together with our sisters and brothers throughout the world who sing and struggle with us for justice and peace and the incoming reign of God.

And when the songs end, the songs, which recall to memory and imagination those big and important struggles, our conversation continues. What remains with us are the courage, the freedom, the imagination and the hope that we have sung into being. What remains when our singing finishes for today is the question: what is the next big and important thing? What will be our next test of endurance that will continue to forge our characters and create new hope? What journey will we embark on next together? What does God have in store for us?

I'm eager to find out. Are you? And as we explore that question as a community, in thanksgiving and gratitude and hope and pride, yes, pride, for the distance we have come thus far, let's always remember the Gospel promise: the ones who endure to the end will be saved. Alleluia! Amen.