

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. J. Gregory Prior on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 29, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

In him we live and move and have our being.

If you take a tourists trip to Savannah especially if you take a harbor tour, the guides will point out to you a famous statue along the waterfront, some of you have undoubtedly seen it, it is called the waving girl.

The story behind the waving girl is this. She was a woman, a young girl, in the late nineteenth century, the late 1880s. Her name was Florence Martus and for a period of 44 years from 1888 until sometime in the 1930s she is said to have greeted every single ship that came into the port in Savannah by waving a handkerchief at it. It is estimated that she greeted 50,000 ships over the years.

Now romantics like to say that the reason she did so was that she got engaged to a sailor and had promised to be there for him when he returned so she waited all those years. No evidence supports that but it makes for a good story.

However, what the people of Savannah admired so much, what prompted them to commission a statue by one of great bronze sculptors in American history, Felix de Weldon, was their admiration for her constancy. Over and over again, day after day after day, in season and out of season, faithfully she stood there and greeted the ships and welcomed people. What wonderful constancy. What wonderful stability. Don't we wish we had that kind of constancy in our own lives; that we were not so much here now and gone the next day. So much passion in our enthusiasms...especially, especially in our relationship with God. In our spirituality don't we yearn for a sense that we can be stable and constant in our relationship with God? How do we do that?

In this morning's story from Acts (17:22-31), Paul is approaching the community in Athens. Usually when Paul came into a community, he went first of all to the Jewish synagogue; he had an established base there, and he could begin with some people who had some idea of what he was talking about. He didn't find that in Athens so he went around the center of town looking for some kind of common ground and what he found was something our spiritual parlance today you would call an understanding of a higher power. These people believed in something and he wanted to connect on the basis of that. So he said to them, "You understand that there is a divinity in whom we live and move and have our being. And that divinity has made us so that we grow, act and we feel for him seeking, trying to find. It's that divinity who wants to be close to you." That was Paul's good news to them.

Today's gospel passage (John 14:15-21) comes from that long section in John's Gospel that is called the "Farewell Discourse." It's the night before the Crucifixion and Jesus has told his beloved disciples that he is leaving. He will be with them no more and they are beginning to feel a sense of desolation. And he promises them, "I will not leave you orphans, I will not leave you desolate. Don't feel that it is all over, that there will no longer be a connection because the spirit of God will remain with you. That is my promise. In season and out of season, day after day, you can trust that the spirit of God will be in you, supporting you, making me present to you spiritually in that way that I was with you physically. Do not feel cut off and separate. You can still be close, draw in and experience the goodness that I have promised to you." That's God's promise to us too, that the spirit of God can be with us in season and out of season.

In our church in Rhode Island we are studying a book called *Naked Spirituality*. The author's name is Brian McLaren. Some of us here heard Brian speak at the January Adventure last January. The message of this book is that you can have a life with God and he proposes twelve simple words as part of a pattern of living with God through the sort of the seasons of your spiritual life. It won't all be exactly the same, there's a spring, summer, autumn, or winter—different ways that we are in our relationship with God. But in each of those various seasons you can still be close to God. God remains and stays with you. That's the divine promise and it is the divine invitation for each of us to enter into a kind of life in which God can come close to us and we can experience Him no matter how things are with us at the moment—year in, year out—day in, day out—month in, month out—season after season after season. You are still close to God and He abides, He lives, He remains with you.

Let me quote from this passage that Brian writes on that subject:

Through the seasons we shape a spiritual life that is deep, honest and strong. The point isn't to stay in spring and summer forever nor is the point to get to or through winter as soon as possible any more than the point of life is advancing from infancy to old age as soon as possible. No, the point is to live each stage well, to learn well what each day and season will have to teach, to live and enjoy life and bear the good fruits of a life with God through all of life's seasons. By the time we pass through these seasons a few times these twelve words become practices to the soul what the rhythms of breath sleep and pulse are to the body, constant, natural, life giving, unconscious, effortless. Our spiritual life becomes our way of remaining awake to God and a loudness. Our way of being at home in the universe with as St. Francis said "Brother sun and sister moon, brother fox and sister follow," connected and at peace with everything. Together, we and God our life an elderly couple bound together to a lifetime of joy and heartache. Holding hands with the one we love and with whom we have shared everything so little needs to be said as we sit together looking at the sea, watching the waves roll in. We start with one kind of simplicity and will someday arrive at a second simplicity that has much in common with the first but has been deepened, broadened and strengthened through all we've experienced and endured in between.

In the late nineteenth century an English Vicar nearing the end of his life, dying, suffering from tuberculosis, composed what has become one of the best known and best loved Christian hymns. It's called *Abide with Me*. (#662 in The Hymnal 1982) I think we might close today with a prayer using the first verse of that hymn; a prayer that asks for God's spirit to abide with us in season and out of season, our good days and our bad days so that we know that God's spirit blesses, strengthens and upholds us.

Abide with me: falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide:
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Amen

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