6th Sunday of Easter
Cycle A, 5.21.17
Acts 8:5-8.14-17/1 Peter 3:13-22/John 14:15-21

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR
A ‘FOURTH TRIMESTER’

Over the past few decades, a pediatrician on the faculty of the University of Southern California, Dr. Harvey Karp, has popularized the idea of the “fourth trimester.” He bases his teaching on the theory that human infants -- due to their growing head circumferences -- are necessarily born three months too soon. So he advocates a method of parenting that simulates life in the womb by incorporating rocking movement, skin-on-skin contact, and rhythmic sounds that echo a mother’s heartbeat – all ways to ease newborns into their new existence after birth. He’s even marketed a bassinet to help fussing infants fall sleep easily. It gently rocks or jiggles and can be programmed to play white noise like rain or like the sound a baby heard in the womb for nine months.

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, their friend and teacher, the disciples of the early church faced a transition just as transformational and shattering as the one from womb to world. The disciples’ understanding and experience of life had been fundamentally altered in their encounter with the Risen Jesus. And, we could say, in the 40 days from resurrection to ascension, Jesus offers the disciples their own “fourth trimester” of sorts to become acclimated to this new way of interacting with him.

But just as their time with the earthly Jesus ended, so too will the time they share with him post-resurrection. And after the ascension once again they will transition to a new way of being in this world, a new way of being connected to Jesus, the True Vine, and listening for the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

In today’s Gospel Jesus prepares his friends for this time that will come. He assures them, “I will not leave you orphans.” This verse in John is the only time the term “orphan” is heard in all four Gospels. And it gives us a new image of Jesus, that of a parent. Many years ago the book “The Prophet” by Kahlil Gibran offered advice to parents on their important role. Gibran used the insightful image of a bow and arrow when he wrote to mothers and fathers: You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness; for even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable. It’s good to remember that both children and parents are under God’s loving care and watchful eye.
Another type of prophet spoke eloquently and humorously about the challenges parents face. In the 1960’s and 70’s, Erma Bombeck, a housewife and journalist from Ohio, was a syndicated newspaper columnist. She was the Oprah Winfrey of her day, offering humor to parents -- as when she wrote "Insanity is hereditary. You can catch it from your kids." and "Never loan your car to anyone to whom you've given birth." But she also taught profound wisdom, as when she said: 

"A child needs your love most when he or she deserves it the least."

By 1985 Erma Bombeck’s column was published three times a week in over 900 newspapers in the U.S. and Canada and she had fifteen bestselling books.

In one of them she used an image which I think offers some insight into today’s gospel. She wrote: "I see children as kites. You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until they are breathless, they crash and you add a longer tail. They hit a roof top. You pluck them out of a rain spout. You patch and comfort, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they will fly." In today’s gospel Jesus says "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always." If children are like kites, maybe parents are like advocates. God cares for us in the hope and trust that one day we will fly. It was that hope that Jesus had for his disciples. Even though Jesus had to let his disciples go, they had to take flight on their own -- with God's initiative -- to spread the Good News. In the process, Christ promises, that he will not leave them orphaned.

As the Church nears the Great Feast of Pentecost, Jesus reminds his followers that he will send the Spirit. That's important for us to remember. For the disciples, as for us, being a follower can get pretty difficult. Our energy wanes, distractions increase, the demands on our time never seem to lessen. Making space for the Lord in prayer and worship is a continuing challenge. The daily frustrations that surround us and difficult personalities and people who confront us can make us very sour about life. Suffering is an inherent part of discipleship, but God’s grace helps us to endure patiently the difficulties we face. When united with Christ and his cross, suffering need not squelch our hope. That’s why Peter's Letter instructs: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence . . ." When people have their own, narrow and sometimes selfish agenda with which they launch attack, we all know how difficult it is to be gentle and reverent. We know mean-spiritedness all too well. We see finger-pointing. We long for a time that never was. We are tempted to go back, rather than move forward. If we truly understand reverence and love, we will grow into an understanding of the “common good” in our families, in our country and in our world -- a good for the whole. That means we will not always get what we want, but we will get what is best. The Church is not a field and sky of stray kites. We are lifted by the same Spirit-Breath.

Bombeck continues in her reflection about parents and children: “Finally, they are airborne, but they need more string and you keep letting it out and with each twist of the ball of twine, there is sadness that goes with joy because the kite becomes more distant and somehow you know that it won't be long before that beautiful creature will
snap the lifeline that bound you together and soar as it was meant to soar . . . free."

Children are like kites. Parents, teachers, heroes and heroines, pastors and prophets, are reminders of the care and nurturing of our God, leading us to freedom. In the hope of Christian freedom, in the hope of God's church, we proclaim this day with the Advocate, "SOAR ON... BE FREE . . . !"

The departure of Jesus will leave the disciples feeling abandoned. Jesus is aware of this and assures them that he will return. He will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with them to guide them. That’s the Spirit for which we pray at Pentecost and every day. In this parenting, Jesus is joined by a new figure he introduces as the “Helper” ... the Spirit of truth” – the “Midwife” bringing to birth a new creation. The disciples are moving into a new time — one of great hope and also of great pain. Shortly after promising to send them the Advocate, Jesus tells the disciples why they will need one: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15:20).

In our own lives as Christians we also face challenges, persecutions and transitions. Some may be as simple as bearing with a difficult co-worker or cranky child, but others -- the death of a spouse, facing mental illness, the struggles that come with aging, fighting an addiction -- may demand everything of us. In all that we encounter, we can hold on to Jesus’ promise, “I will not leave you orphans.” We know that we have an advocate, a helper, who remains with us, and an attentive parent who holds us close as we embrace a new reality. We now are the ones who must proclaim the Risen Christ to a world desperately in need of mercy and love. May we always be ready to give an explanation for our hope.

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