

St. Mark's Garden of Blessings Proper 10A Ordinary 16A Pentecost +6

I think we can safely say that the church as a whole, not just St. Mark's, has taken a pretty serious hit over the past 15-16 weeks.

One minute we are observing the 3rd Sunday in lent and the next it is the 12th of July and we are well into the Season after Pentecost.

And now, we have gone from just trying to fit a service in our beautiful Garden of Blessings into our summer schedule, to now taking full advantage of a "safe space" where, by observing social distancing, along with other precautions that include a highly sanitized version of Holy Communion, we are finally able to meet, at least for now, in small numbers to break bread together.

Hopefully, barring a drastic resurgence of this virus we will be able to do this on at least a weekly basis.

At some point, hopefully in early August the Bishop and the diocesan COVID19 Task force will allow us to expand our numbers from 10, well, 10 "ish" ... to 25% of occupancy which here in the Garden would virtually mean that anyone who wants to come, can.

I pray that my weekly missives in conjunction with the Bishop's virtual presence transmitted from St. Thomas' Menasha, Deacon Bruce's Bible Study, Dick's Friday Morning Prayer service and Barb's Sunday Morning Zoom based Coffee hour have kept you relatively sane throughout this tumultuous period.

Has it been horrible and near impossible to bear?

I sincerely hope not.

I have tried to have somewhat regular conversations with all the members of the parish which with all the busyness of our days has proven to be much harder than I had at first thought it would be.

Between weekly deanery meetings and diocesan conferences, writing my spiritual and theological epistles, preparing three meals a day....

Yeah, how about that, my lack of daily visits to McDonalds and Subway have no doubt saved a great deal of money but I fear I have used up three years worth of dishwasher soap in four months.

On a personal note, I realize it is not my fault but nonetheless I apologize on behalf of my real boss that you did not get to celebrate Holy Week and Easter in its usual way.

Do you have any special moments you might cling on to as memories that are not necessarily bad ones?

I do and I would just like to share that on the night of Maundy Thursday while I was praying over the “virtual” sacrament as it was presented to us from Our Lady of Grace, Sheboygan...

I was reminded of how I first learned how to conduct that liturgy as it was taught to me in the mid 1990’s by the same priest who is now the interim at Grace.

As a wise man once told me, “It is a small world... and an even smaller church.”

What a strange night that was...

Just as I was entering the Third Way, that of Unification with God...

A lady entered the church.

On her way to extinguish the candles she killed the lights.

Upon said extinguishment, she realized she was now in the pitch dark.

Unaware she was being broadcast live on the internet to the whole world, she let out an...“Oh s^!t”.

Now those are two words I do not typically associate with the adoration of the Most Holy Presence of Christ...

But as I have first-hand knowledge that God has a sense of humor, you know what; I think I might have seen our savior with a hint of a smile on his divine face.

After all, those two words and I am not going to repeat them might have more aptly summed up how almost every Christian both the living and the dead were feeling at that very moment in time.

And if Jesus knows that is where we were spiritually during Holy Week then where might we be now as we tentatively emerge from our cocoons in much the same way a toad emerges from hibernation.

For it was George Orwell who wrote...

“Before the swallow, before the daffodil, and not much later than the snowdrop, the common toad salutes the coming of spring after his own fashion, which is to emerge from a hole in the ground, where he has lain buried since the previous autumn, and crawl as rapidly as possible towards the nearest suitable patch of water.

At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent.

His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large.”

Perhaps there is no better piece of prose that could better sum up how I feel these days and perhaps that includes you as well.

So where exactly are we and where do we go from here?

Some have said the church is now doomed to die a natural death while others believe that personal spirituality, piety, discipline and faith...all critical facets of the Christian faith, as well as other religions for that matter, have never before been this essential to the human condition as we collectively move forward toward an uncertain future.

Of course, as we all know, hindsight possesses perfect vision and if we only knew when this pandemic first took root what we know now, how much better off would we be?

And what will become of the church?

Let us first consider that the Church as an entity is much more than a social club made up of somewhat like-minded folks.

What it is is the Body of Christ on this earth and Mother Church has seen and endured a lot over the centuries.

Just to take a few examples of what the doomsayers predicted would be the sounding of the death knell for the church..

First there was Saints Peter and Paul who could find very little to agree upon.

Such discord existed between these two Apostles that it was surprising they found any way to coexist at all.

So deep was the division that the Council of Jerusalem, held around the year 50, came together to hash out such differences as justification by faith versus works and the fierce debate over gentiles being allowed into the new church directly without the requirement to become a Jew first.

But the church survived. It thrived in fact.

Seven more similar councils would follow where learned leaders debated and argued over what was a heresy and what was essential to salvation.

Was Jesus fully man. Fully God. Or was he both?

Was Mary the bearer of God, or simply the Bearer of Christ?

Were Icons heretical examples of blasphemous artwork, or were they windows into another plane of existence, one where the saints could be found in all their glory?

It was a real mess. But the church survived. It thrived in fact.

Almost a thousand years later the church suffered the loss of nearly half its members during the Great East-West Schism.

This time the arguments were over such things as Original Sin and whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son.

The church was torn apart.

But the church survived. It thrived in fact.

Five hundred more years would pass and a Catholic Priest named Martin Luther along with other leaders such as John Calvin, John Knox, Huldrych Zwingli and others led the departure of yet another huge portion of the Church Catholic.

But the church survived. It thrived in fact.

Zooming ahead past two World Wars, past the genocide of large number of certain races, past the construction of such extinction level tools as the Atom Bomb, all the way to 2020...let's face it, this has been a rough year.

So out in the open are the issues that face us today, because let's face it, they are not limited to just a global pandemic...

So apparent are they that I do not need to review them with you today.

People have said, I know, because I have read it and heard it, that the church this time is definitely doomed to be discarded onto the rubbish heap of history.

But I promise you, this will NOT be the case.

In fact I predict that not only will the church survive, it will again, thrive.

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