13th Sunday after Pentecost

September 3, 2017

Fr. Pat Young

Prudence Crandall may sound like the name of a character in a Jane Austen novel, but she was a real-life force of nature in 19th century New England. Crandall started a boarding school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut, impassioned to raise educated women. One day, she received an application from a young African American girl named Sarah Harris. Crandall admitted Harris, creating the first integrated classroom in the United States.

As Crandall accepted more and more students of color into her school, more and more white parents pulled their children out. Local merchants refused to do business with the African American students, and the townspeople ostracized them and plotted to pass laws that made their education difficult or impossible.

Vandals even set the school on fire, which prompted Crandall to close, for fears that the children's lives would be in danger. We remember Crandall in early September as one through whom God worked for the sake of bringing forth justice in our world.

We look on these moments in history with a sense of clarity --- we believe that Crandall was inspired by God in her resolute will to teach girls of every color and race, and we believe that, if we were to find ourselves in her position, we would do the same thing.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it often takes Crandall's agency out of the mix and assumes that the path she took was the obvious one, that she had no internal conflict about what educating her girls might cost, and that perhaps a famous composer provided her a triumphant soundtrack to reassure her along the way. Most of us have discovered by now that life does not play out like a Hollywood film.

God does not often appear to us in burning bushes as He did with Moses or dealing with Jeremiah -- although Jesus comes close every now and then on pieces of toast...potato chips...in the clouds...or in cups of coffee.

When we look at Jeremiah, we are looking at a man who consistently protested against political and religious policies that sealed the fate of his country (sound familiar?), a prophet who in the eyes of the establishments of his day was both traitor and heretic.

Maybe Prudence Crandall could have "marched" with Jeremiah to protest the lack of justice for her students as he complained against those in his care.

You may remember Jeremiah complained to God about the job given him more than any other prophet. He complained against Judah's kings for their weaknesses. He thought God was being unfair. Yet Jeremiah knows God is being patient with him and assures him if he turns back (or repents) God will be with him.

For us, do you ever feel serving the Lord in your ministry is a pleasant task or not? With God's message of love, remember He is ready to equip you for your role of meeting the needs of others, just like He did with Jeremiah.

Paul sums up in our Romans selection the four kinds of love that we believers in Christ are to show each other -- self-sacrificial love -- how believers ought to live in response to the lavish grace of God!

I believe it can go without saying, if you have watched these last few days any of the rescues in the aftermath of Harvey, we have witnessed many, many times this love in diligence, hospitality, blessings and rejoicing.

These actions have been praiseworthy -- no race, color, creed or anything else kept the love of God from being exhibited in those rescues!!

The disciples had a similar encounter with God in Jesus. At some point in their years together, Jesus starts to reveal that he expects to undergo some significant suffering at the hands of the powers that be. He shares that he expects to be killed. His disciples probably react in some of the ways you might expect, but it is Peter who pulls Jesus to the side and rejects these grim predictions. Immediately Jesus rejects Peter's resistance to reality.

"Get behind me, Satan!"

"Join the path on which I am walking," Jesus seems to say. "Lose the pre-occupation with the way you wanted or expected things to be, and get on board with reality!" Sometimes we need to hear the same message, and often it needs to feel like a slap across the face to be effective.

During the opening Eucharist of the 2017 Episcopal Youth Event (EYE) Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached a barn-burner. During the sermon, Bishop Curry bounced around the stage in his typical fashion, splashed water from the font all over a crowd of exuberant teenagers,

and repeated a phrase that will forever be engraved on the minds of all 1,500 people in attendance:

"If you want to change the world, follow Jesus."

Indeed, following Jesus has, does, and will continue to lead us on a path of personal and communal transformation. It is not, however, we who change the world, but rather God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who changes us.

God sneaks into our inner life and pivots our consciousness. God calls us out of our routines to notice the plight that weighs heavy on God's heart, and the more we follow Jesus, the more we read the gospels, and the more we pray and meditate on Jesus' life, the more we will encounter those in need. Not only that, the more we seek God, the more God will lead us to face our enemies, face our fears, and face the challenge of risking everything for Jesus' sake.

This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. To follow Jesus is to go to the place we would not normally go, to follow a path that leads to the outsider, and to seek an encounter with the Living God.

When we follow that path, we often find ourselves in intimidating circumstances, but God is with us, and where we find ourselves is on holy ground.

And that my friend, is Evangelism!