

NOBODY'S FOOL

April 11, 2010

Texts – Psalm 118: 14 - 29

John 20: 19 - 31

Do you remember the 1994 movie classic, “Nobody’s Fool”? It stars Paul Newman playing the part of a man named Donald Sullivan (or Sully). At age 60, the story line says, Sully is . . .

“divorced from his own wife, carrying on halfheartedly with another man’s wife, estranged from his son, devoid of self-knowledge, badly crippled and virtually unemployable – all of which he stubbornly confuses with independence.”

Sully is insistent on remaining nobody’s fool, hence the movie’s title. Time and time again the defining characteristic of this independence, however, is Sully’s tendency to go off on what he calls “stupid streaks.” Freedom, for him, turns out to be the freedom to do the wrong thing at the wrong time, over and over and over again.

It’s a fun movie. If you’ve never seen it, I heartily recommend it. At one point in the film Sully and his arch-nemesis (a man much younger than he) have a conversation. You’re “60 years old and still getting crushes on other men’s wives,” his antagonist says. “I hope that when I’m your age, I’ll be a little bit smarter than that.” Sully replies, “You sure are off to a slow start.”

Nobody’s fool . . . it’s an apt description of Thomas’ outlook on life in our gospel lesson this morning. “*Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails,*” he says, “*and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.*” [John 20: 25] Thomas refuses to go along with what everybody else says, unless and until he can actually experience it

to be true for himself. “Doubting Thomas” is the way we have subsequently come to call him. He’s the apostle that got off to a slow start. A lot of us are like him. It is not necessarily a bad thing.

At its best, the doubting spirit which Thomas’ attitude represents reflects a determination to find a truth that is strong enough to carry the weight of a whole life. Build your life only on platitudes and quotations from the Readers’ Digest and you are building on sand, often times quicksand. We are not asked to do that in this church.

“Do you promise now to consider seriously the fact of God,” we ask those who come to join us; “. . . not in blind faith, but with honesty and openness?” We don’t assume there are ready answers to each and every one of life’s predicaments or dilemmas. Indeed, many of us are suspicious of the pat answer and the memorized quotation. We expect – no, we demand – the right to think for ourselves. In the words the Apostle Paul used in his letter to the Philippians, we believe each person must “*work out his or her own salvation with fear and trembling, (confident that) God is at work in all of us, both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.*”

[Philippians 2: 12-13]

Doubt, when looked at in this way, is not so much an obstacle to faith as it is (or can become) a doorway to a deeper and more meaningful life of faith. That is certainly what it turned out to be for Thomas. Though he initially refused to go along with his friends in their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead, he became a strong proponent of Christ’s new life after he had experienced it for himself. His journey took him far beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire with its Greco-Roman culture to southern India and the Jewish community at Goa. From there he preached the gospel throughout the Indian sub-continent for over twenty years, laying the foundation for the Mar Thoma Church, which continues to this very day.

So “Doubting Thomas” became “Mar Thoma,” which means “Saint Thomas” . . .

nobody's fool, even though he got off to a slow start. But notice one other thing about this story. Yes Thomas refuses to go along with the crowd. Yes he insists on making up his own mind based on his own experience, not just the testimony of others. But he does all of that without cutting himself off from the community of women and men who have become his family of support and friendship over the years. He does not "ride off into the sunset," alone in his disappointment and grief and anger. He stays connected. He hangs in . . . and therefore he's there with them, eight days later, when the Risen Christ appears to them again.

Have you ever wondered why? Why does he 'hang around'? Is it because he's weak? Was he simply afraid to be alone? Hardly. Thomas stayed, I'm convinced, because the spirit of independence within him was so strong that he had the courage to doubt even his own doubt. Walk away now, I like to think he said to himself, and you'll never know if what they say is true or false. Cut yourself off now . . . go your own way now . . . ride off into the sunset now, and you will remain forever stuck in the place where you are now.

Obviously I'm not just talking about Thomas anymore; I'm talking about you and me and all of us. There is not a single one of us here who has all the answers to all of the questions all of the time. We are all, in Donald Sullivan's words, "slow starters." We are all seekers after the truth. Yes, we are at different places on life's journey, but there is a bit of the spirit of Thomas in each of us, just as there is a bit of the spirit of Peter and James and John and Paul . . . and Mary Magdalene and Salome and Martha. No one "gets it all."

"Now we see in a mirror dimly," is the way Paul put it; *"one day we shall see face to face; now we know in part, but one day we shall understand fully even as we each have been fully understood."* [I Corinthians 13: 11] Underline the phrase, "now we know in part."

Isn't that true in every area of human life? Do you know everything there is to know about the laws of quantum mechanics and particle physics? Of course not. But that doesn't stop

you from getting up every morning and going about your daily routine, and that in spite of the fact that every step you take is governed at a fundamental level by those same laws of physical science about which most of us know at most only a part.

The same dynamic applies in our relationships with one another. I do not know everything there is to know about Donna Lee, nor does she know everything there is to know about me, but together we have built a life for over twenty years which is sustaining and life giving. We know each other only “*in part*,” but the parts we do know have led each of us to love and trust one another for the future. We have not been disappointed.

Just so with Thomas two thousand years ago as he joined his friends eight days after the resurrection. He was “nobody’s fool.” The people he loved and trusted more than any others in the world were united in their conviction that they had seen Jesus risen and living. It was a notion Thomas simply could not comprehend. Who can blame him? Not me. Not, evidently, any of his friends either – they still welcomed him in their fellowship.

“*Jesus came and stood among them*,” John’s gospel says. He said to Thomas: “. . . *do not be faithless but believing*.” And Thomas cries out, “*My Lord and my God!*” He found the ‘proof’ he needed, his own experience of the reality of Christ’s living presence. Was it literally the experience which John says was offered to him – the chance to touch the hands and sides of the risen Jesus? We aren’t told that he ever did that. Indeed, the implication of John’s story is that it wasn’t necessary. Thomas becomes a believer, John’s gospel says, because with honesty and openness, being willing to doubt his own doubts, he remains part of the faith community’s fellowship.

It is the Second Sunday of Easter – a day widely known amongst clergy as “Low Sunday.” Our pews were full a week ago on Easter morning; on Low Sunday, they seem half-empty by comparison, and in fact often are even emptier than that. The truth of the matter is that

the Easter message – “Christ is risen!” – is hard to swallow. The phrase, “Nobody’s Fool,” describes the self-image of many of us. And that’s just fine. The fact is we “only know in part.” The promise is, “one day we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood.” In the meantime, three things are of utmost importance: faith, hope, and love. Faith means “trust” – trust in God and in one another. Hope in God, and in our life together. And love, which binds all things together in perfect harmony. May you experience that for yourself in this room today. Amen.