

I read a story last week about an 85 yr. old Chinese man who put himself up for adoption. It sounds kind of crazy. Because he wasn't sick, he wasn't poor. He had a home & a good pension. But his wife had died, and his sons were no longer in the picture. So one morning last December when he was riding his bike for his morning errands, he took a scrap of paper and posted a note at a bus stop near home. The note read: *Looking for someone to adopt me. Lonely old man in his 80s. Strong-bodied. Can shop, cook and take care of himself. No chronic illness. I retired... with a monthly pension.*¹ His name was Han. Today, on this last Sunday of Easter before we arrive at the season of Pentecost, let me invite us to hear Han's story as a parable of Christian life.

Han caught the world's attention when he reached a place of despair. He was isolated, alone, facing the prospect of a lonely death. So he cried for help — and his message —that simple handwritten note at a bus stop— went viral. A woman took a photo & posted his adoption request on a social media platform. It was picked up by a local news source. All of a sudden Han's phone began ringing off the hook. Han discovered hope.

Christian life has a similar pattern. Christianity doesn't begin in a scientific lab or the towers of academia. It doesn't begin in the halls of political power. Our story — our faith— begins at a grave in front of a tomb. It doesn't begin with a

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/he-was-one-of-millions-of-chinese-seniors-growing-old-alone-so-he-put-himself-up-for-adoption/2018/05/01/53749264-3d6a-11e8-912d-16c9e9b37800_story.html

Hallmark card in front of a manger at Christmas. Our faith doesn't begin with a sweet picture of a baby's birth. Our faith begins at a tomb. Christianity begins with a story of surprising hope in the face of fear & isolation. It begins as a discovery of hope in the face of death.

That's the basic story of our faith. It's the pattern we find "in the beginning" with the creation story in Genesis when God speaks light & life in the midst of darkness of chaos. It was also the repeated pattern of ancient Israel in their national life. The people who gave us our stories of faith were an odd little nation living on a tiny strip of land in the ANE, surrounded by massive empires that were always marching over their territory. They were always praying for God to bring light & life in the midst of their own darkness & chaos.

That's the story of our faith. Supremely at Easter when, much to our surprise, we discover hope in the face of death at the Resurrection of Jesus. You see, we can't survive without hope; at least not very well, or very long. Han, "compared his plight to a withering plant." He said "Elderly people are 'like flowers and trees.... If we are not watered, we cannot grow'."² Hope is the water that makes us grow. Today's Psalm uses almost exactly the same imagery. The psalmist describes people who delight in God's teaching as, "trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither," (Psa. 1.3). In other words, God is their hope. Our faith is a journey from

² Ibid.

barrenness to fruitfulness, from isolation to community, from loneliness to belonging. It's a story of hope.

But that story of hope is almost never a simple journey in a single, positive direction. That's what Han discovered in his life. Because as soon as his phone began ringing off the hook, he realized it was going to be hard to find the kind of family he hoped for. He wasn't looking for just *anyone* to adopt him. He had needs, expectations and—for goodness sakes—he had standards. In January he received a call from a migrant worker and hung up on him because the offer was obviously beneath him.

That reality is part of our Christian story too. Maybe we don't talk about it as often as we should, but the story of our faith, the story that moves from the empty tomb to the Upper Room for a reunion with the risen Jesus, that story of hope is anything but a simple journey in a single direction. One of the greatest challenges for early Christians was learning to see each other as family.

Today in Acts we find the apostles in a committee meeting because they need to fill an empty seat in their committee after Judas, the traitor, killed himself (the lectionary leaves out those messy verses about his bowels spilling onto the ground, Acts 1.18-20). The apostles do a curious thing when they replace Judas. They whittle the list down to 2 candidates — then they let God decide. They give God the final word by casting lots, which is sort of like rolling dice. And they end up with a guy named Matthias. We don't know if they even liked Matthias. Maybe

they were disappointed Matthias got chosen. The other guy has a much better description. He was “Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus,” (Acts 1.23). He gets three names. Maybe he had a better background than a guy simply called Matthias. Who knows.

Whether they liked him or not, Matthias was one of the last choices they got to make about their community. Because as we're going to hear next week, the doors are literally blown off at Pentecost when the God's Spirit rains down from heaven and people begin joining in droves. Then persecution breaks out and they flee Jerusalem only to discover that everywhere they go new people —and unworthy people— are being filled with God's Spirit just like them. They realized it was going to be hard to find the kind of community they hoped for.

So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that on the night before Jesus was arrested he prayed for his followers. At the Last Supper Jesus prayed for them and today in our Gospel reading we hear a portion of that prayer. It's called the High Priestly Prayer because it straddles a line between Jesus' presence and his absence. He's supposed to be sitting right there at table with them but he's saying things like, “I am no longer in the world,” (Jn. 17.11). He's both their table companion and their priest.

He prays for their protection. He prays for comfort and knowledge. And most striking of all, he prays for unity (17.11). One of our greatest challenges has always been seeing each other as members of the same family. So in those final

moments with his disciples Jesus prays that we all might “one” *just as* he and the Father are “one.”

We're meant to be one, not because we all believe the same things or agree on the same things. We're meant to be one because we're following Jesus. That's it. One of the interesting things about being a parish priest is you realize just how many differences & disagreements can appear with even a small number of people. Here's some advice for all of us: let's not pray for a bigger church until we're ready to embrace people we may not like. Don't pray for it until then. Because anything else would either be a nightmare or it would be so shallow that it's meaningless.

The question for us today on the last Sunday of Easter is this: will we become an answer to Jesus' prayer? Think about that. We usually think of God as the one who answers prayer. But today Jesus is pleading with the Father that we will become the answer to *his* prayer. Are we ready to become one body —a family — for no other reason than we've been given to each other by Jesus? Are we willing to embrace each other simply because we've been given?

It is possible to be that kind of community. We know it's possible because today is Mother's Day. And one of the greatest compliments we can pay any mother is their willingness to embrace a child simply because they've been given. Maybe we've been fortunate enough to have a mother who embraces us and loves us not because she can make us into her own image, but simply because we've

been given to her. That kind of embrace is never easy. It may even feel like a kind of death to some of our hopes & wishes.

But if our Scriptures are any indication, it's also one of the most powerful testimonies we can ever offer the world. That's what 1 John wants us to hear. Today 1 John says our greatest testimony is showing others that Jesus is the source of our common life. "This is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son," (1Jn. 5.11). As Christians Jesus is the source of our life, and our hope.

Han, the elderly Chinese man who put himself up for adoption, was never able to embrace others as much as he hoped. He was never able to give himself to others for adoption. 3 months after posting his note, even though he wasn't sick, he died. The tragedy is that sometimes our needs, our preferences, or "high standards" cut us off from one of our greatest sources of healing: each other. Over these next three months while we're away as clergy and congregation let me invite you to keep reflecting on what it means for us to embrace one another simply because we've been given to each other by Jesus.

What will that look like at St. Chrysostom's? We can't say for sure. But we can do this much. We can follow the lead of those first apostles from the book of Acts. We can begin by embracing their prayer and making it our prayer for this church. Let's follow their lead, and make this our prayer: "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us who you have chosen to join us and to journey with us in this life of faith. (cf. Acts 1:24). *Amen.*