

EASTER SIX, YEAR A, MAY 14, 2023

Does anyone remember a story from 15 years ago that made the national news about the new Yankee Stadium that was almost near completion? The story was about how the builders of the new Yankee Stadium spent five hours and \$50,000 digging through two feet of concrete. Do you know why? They did this to extract a David Ortiz Red Sox jersey that had been secretly buried in the concrete floor of the visiting team's dug out. A construction worker, who was a diehard Red Sox fan, had slipped the jersey into the concrete in order to permanently "jinx" the new Yankee stadium. The story of the jersey finally came to light because another construction worker who had seen the shirt go into the slab got worried and confessed: "I don't want to be responsible for sinking the franchise," he said. The stadium, a 1.3 billion dollar project, was brought to a screeching halt because the future for the Yankees was endangered and immediate, expensive action was taken: why? Because a lot of people believed in the jinxing power of a piece of cloth submerged down in a concrete floor in a locker room.

That was one high-powered hex! Or not? No one can completely escape what has been called "magical or superstitious thinking" We "knock on wood," throw spilled salt over our shoulders, can't resist reading our horoscopes, always take notice of a "Friday the 13th, many hotels and office buildings do not have a 13th floor and many people refuse to stay in rooms with the number 13 in them." Or if you think you're immune to "magical thinking," answer me this: how many of you here this morning would buy a house that someone's been murdered in or how many of you don't think twice about walking under a ladder?

When I moved to North Carolina and we were getting house insurance for our new home, the county told us that the house number listed on our closing papers was incorrect. It took a little digging through all the paperwork to find a letter from the builder to the county requesting that the number they had listed as 666 be changed to 668. He didn't believe anyone would buy a house with the number 666 as the address.

Now we all desire things that will give us peace of mind and there are items and ways of living that do just that. Little children have that special "blankie" or stuffed animal that magically imparts peace, security and serenity. Even big corporations hire specialists to organize the "feng shui" in their work spaces. The late musician George Michael bought the Steinway piano that John Lennon composed his best known work on: "Imagine." When Michaels was alive, he not only took it on tour with him but shipped the piano off to places that were in need of some kind of spiritual support. The piano was put on public display, open for any and all to sit down and plunk out a few notes, to seek out a bit of solace in its noteworthy presence.

No matter how much scientific knowledge we acquire about the world we live in, physical reality is never enough. The human spirit knows there is always more to be revealed, that there is something more out there. So many people are looking for that spiritual experience, where they will find more meaning in their lives, more feeling, more connection, more life - a deeper reality in life where they hope to be at one with nature, at one with one another and at one with God or supreme being who is the "Ground of All Being".

In today's epistle we find Paul in Athens. Athens is the center of worship for all the Greek gods that appease every area of life; commerce, love, war, travel etc. There

is even a shrine to an unknown god just in case they have missed one. Paul sees that the Athenians are very religious and the lavish attention they pay to all these gods. Paul's speech to the Athenians was designed to get his audience thinking about that inner yearning for "something more," that "groping" for the "unknown God." This group of people was highly educated but Paul also warned them that there was a difference between knowledge and wisdom. He told them there is no need to worship an unknown god as the God they yearn for is not far away. The God who created the universe, who gave life to all creatures, "does not live in shrines made by human hands" and is not "an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." Basically he is saying that you can spend your life worshipping gold, silver, or stone and live in the ignorance of God and God's love that is also found in Christ's teachings. Idols of gold, silver, or stone will never contain God, and can never move beyond the "magical" to real faithfulness.

Today, there are so many signs, advertisements, and businesses that are constantly bombarding us trying to appeal to our desire for connection, fulfillment, meaning. How do we get beyond "magical" thinking to a new perspective, a new kind of faithfulness? How do we stop embracing superstitions? How do we feed our longing spirits, without getting superstitious?

Part of why we get involved in the magical, mystical superstitious is because of fear. We fear so many things that we look for ways to protect ourselves. It's not just frightening things we fear but anything that is new and different. In fact the phrase "Do not be afraid" appears 71 times in the Bible. It seems that fear was a common response to either an encounter with the holy or a new and understandably frightening situation. In the gospel lesson Jesus tells the disciples he is getting ready to leave them and so they are visibly upset and fearful so he tells them "Do not be afraid. "

Then he promises he will send an advocate. I will send another who will be with you." The Greek word for advocate is *parakletos* which means, literally, to "call beside", or "to call alongside to help". This word is translated in different versions of the Bible as, "advocate, or comforter, or counsellor, or helper". However, as with many translations none of these can totally capture what the word means. It is the same word used in a court of law to describe the role of a person who is called to stand beside a defendant and plead his or her cause. Bottom line this advocate, comforter or helper is the Holy Spirit and is "Someone who comes to our side, helps us cope with things, encourages and energizes, strengthens and empowers us for living".

Years ago, I read something that helps describe this. "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home." The life of faith can be like that-doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like climbers tied to the rope-tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus.

The Spirit ties us to Jesus. We feel a tug on the rope whenever we are tempted to settle for answers that are easier but cannot give sustained hope and love. So

instead of relying on superstitions, a different model is presented to us in the scriptures. We are presented with the model of the spirit to help us keep Jesus' commandments about love. He said if you love me keep my commandments. What that means is we are to be caring, generous and above all decent people. To be decent is what marks our humanity which is highlighted by the elements of gratitude, displays of respect, taking responsibility, being truthful and honorable and not degrading others. To be decent is for us to show forth the decency of the goodness of God who created us and the goodness of our humanity. When all is said and done when others speak with us they should see and say that we are the children of a good and loving God.

We may be fearful about many things, but the good news is that God is with us through the Spirit, and through the love and caring of others within our family of faith. The companion and advocate promised to us is with us, enveloping us with warmth and strength and presence.

And for us, let us embrace the true magical mystery of God and you will see in God that we can never be alone. Amen.