

Easter II Year A 2011

“Jesus said again, Peace be with you; as the father has sent me, so I send you.”

Jacque Bridges was my second grade teacher. I really liked her, but she had a really bad temper...from time to time she would yank a student out of his desk by his ear and haul him off, ear between thumb and forefinger to the dreaded principal's office...I'm not sure that is legal anymore...but we were a decidedly well behaved class. I remember her sobbing the day President Kennedy was shot and killed. She had lots of personality, a great sense of humor, a shock of wavy red hair which may have had something to do with her temper as the old wives tale has it....but she had a passion for her work, and she made us work hard....that I remember well.

One day when I was in my thirties, some twenty five years or so after being in the second grade, I was in the grocery store, and there was a woman just in front of me with snow white hair pushing her cart....she stopped and turned....and she looked at me and our eyes met....and there she was as plain as day... unmistakably Jacque Bridges.....Mrs. Bridges? I asked (somehow in this time warp I couldn't dare call her Jacque...she might have yanked one of my ears) Her eyes brightened....I'm Jim Flowers, I said....I could tell she'd not recognized me.... I mean back then I was under five feet tall and weighed, let us say, considerably less....but she did remember me, and there we stood outside of time, face to face... she took my hand....We had a polite and brief conversation, and went our separate ways.

But having recognized her stirred in me all sorts of memories, a chemical reaction, my soul stirred up....That was the Christmas I gave Kathy Bennett a Christmas present...summoned my courage...walked right up to her door, knocked, asked her mother for her and gave it to her...I remember riding my new bike that had three gears to school when it was really cold....My father's cousin Richmond being elected attorney general of the state...and his daughter Mary, one of my best friends moving away to Montgomery....Dothan High football games at the old wiregrass stadium... Oscar's restaurant downtown where you could play the juke box from your table... at which my brother Taylor ordered a hotdog with no onions, no chili, no ketchup, no mustard nor mayonnaise...and no bun....all the way home from the store, memories were flooding into my mind because of this recognition....this experience of knowing something known before.

Our gospel story today is a story of recognition....I've heard it preached a hundred times that when we have doubts about the faith...take heart... so did good ole doubting Thomas....but this isn't a story about doubt...we all have doubts...and as you have heard me say before quoting the theologian Paul Tillich...there is no faith without doubt...in fact all the disciples at some time or another doubt this mission of Jesus in each of the four gospels....No, this is a story of recognition (like Odysseus being recognized by his teacher, nurse and finally his wife and daughter....a story of the transforming power of recognition; and in Shakespeare as well)...this is a story told in a community living late in the first century, perhaps even later into the second, a story about the recognition of who this Christ is and perhaps more importantly who they are, the two identities intimately connected... These are second and third generation believers recognizing, remembering something they had known before...an unmistakable experience of the truth.....a meeting face to face with the one to whom they had given their lives.

And the truth about who Jesus is and the truth about who we are, I think, at least according to the writer of John, is this: That to know God, and to therefore know ourselvesunmistakably...we must also like Thomas place our hands into the wounds of our world....Our hands the outward and visible signs of the predisposition of our hearts, minds and souls.....Hands that comfort, encourage, caress....hands that build and create....hands that engender hospitality, hands that embrace....hands that heal....I said in my blog this last week that some say it is reason and cognition that make us human...but I would add to that our hands....the most sensitive and expressive parts of our bodies....Hands also a symbol of vocation...symbols of the work we do....Hands the means of love in the world...It is no wonder that artists always treat the hands in their paintings with special reverence.

When Thomas places his hands into the wounds of Christ he sees....he recognizes God Godself, and sees himself as well....It is by going into our world and placing our hands into the world's wounds that we see God face to face....hand to hand...by placing our hands into the wounds of bare and worn feet, like so many children in Africa....placing our hands into the wounded hands of our elderly, our war wounded....placing our hand into the side of the world's indignity in whatever form that indignity takes....by living for the wounds of our world, brothers and sisters we meet the risen Christ face to face....an unmistakable experience of something we have known all along....that we are born to live for the other, for each other, and that resurrection life is given to each other by touch....and... we recognize the Christ in the wounds of the world because we too are wounded....and

it's the empathy of knowing what being wounded is that binds us to our brothers and our sisters who suffer....and that bond engenders new life and new hope and joy and peace....for those whom we serve and for ourselves as well made manifest in each healing touch....Henri Nouwein, famous for his work with L'Arche, coined the phrase for ministry...He calls those who tend to the suffering of our world:.... The wounded healers.

Let us be wounded healers for the sake of the one sore wounded on the cross, but risen among us...let us place our hands into the wounds of the world and recognize the one who made us and loves us; let us recognize the thing we have known long before... our Lord and our God.... And we will recognize our true selves there as well....our true selves we have known all along.... all these years.