

Golden Jubilee – Sister Carol Stenger – 9/12/15

Good morning, everyone. As I begin this morning I want to offer my own congratulations to Sister Carol. I also want to express the gratitude of her Sisters in community for her life faithfully lived during these fifty years. It's an amazing milestone to reach.

As I began to reflect on the special readings and songs chosen for this celebration, I was invited to consider two questions. Each one would take a long time for anyone to answer. But let me begin with a few simple thoughts. I want us to reflect on:

how we recognize and meet God in the moments of our lives
what difference our experience of God makes - to us, to others, and to our world

As we began our liturgy, we sang and prayed to God, “come and bring our love to birth, in the glory of your son” ... “Sing of the God who loves you.” “may our lives **your love** confess.”

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows the ideal of God's reign in our world.

All division was gone; true community was made visible.

Those who believed were focused on Jesus.

The newly-baptized were filled with awe.

They were moved by God's love and grace to set aside everything.

They lived each day sharing everything, meals, prayer, ownership, community, witnessing to the ways they had been transformed.

Initially, they must have been riding a wave of joy and deep peace.

They had recognized God in Jesus. They had met God and Jesus in their learning and prayer, their meals and community, their witness and service. They had experienced God's great love for them through Jesus and their love had been brought to birth. Their new lives sang of God's love and were a confession of their love. Their experiences and witness impacted others as the reading says, “every day the Lord added to their number.”

In many ways those were the feelings and experiences that Carol and each of us had as we recognized God's call to religious life, as we entered the community of the Sisters of Divine Providence, and spent our first years immersed in learning, sharing, praying, caring, celebrating, and service. In those early heady days, she, and we, could be anything, do anything, because we, like the early Christians, were filled with awe and moved by God's love and grace!

In those days God was easily recognized. Many of us, like the first believers, were riding a certain wave of joy and peace. It seemed we received special graces of inner strength, greater love and generosity, an ever-deeper relationship with God, all of which were evidenced in our daily living and our service of others.

We also understood that life is filled with change and challenge. We may be at the heights of love and delight as in our first reading and we may also experience doubt and despair as did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In those times, God is also with us, as the Gospel story shows, but in times of struggle, it seems that God is not so easily seen or recognized.

When we look at the Emmaus story, we see two disciples who were crushed by the horror of all that had happened to Jesus and the apostles. All joy and hope were gone. They had been replaced by fear, disappointment, sadness. These disciples felt very much alone. The “Messiah” was dead and any promise of a new reign had died with him. The two were most likely returning to their village to pick up lives made even sadder because they had had such hope and now they had none. Jesus’ words and witness had moved them deeply, had brought their love to birth. He was a miracle worker, a truth teller. NOW he was gone! To add to their tremendous sense of loss the religious leaders had been responsible for Jesus’ death. They felt they had nothing left of any value.

Then before they set out, they were astounded by a story too difficult to grasp, too unbelievable to be true. How could it be that the tomb was empty and a “vision of angels” had told the women that Jesus was alive? I expect we can all feel their deep despair. I expect that many of us have personally had similar strong feelings and that we, too, have been crushed by situations or relationships that brought us great sadness and loss. In these significant moments, we return to wondering how we recognize and meet God and what difference our experience of God makes - to us, to others, and to our world.

The hearts and spirits of the two disciples were truly downcast, when Jesus joined them on that road. They shared their deep disappointment and despair with Jesus and he said to them “You foolish ones!” reminding them of all they knew about the Messiah from the Scriptures and the words of the prophets... Imagine how their spirits must have begun to rise! Imagine how little sparks of hope must have begun to filter in!

And then... in their shared meal... when Jesus took the bread, blessed, broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes and hearts were opened; they recognized him. Can you recall times when others came, supported you, offered themselves as listeners, and in their presence, words, caring, you began again to hope; your spirits began to rise. **That** is the difference that our experience of God makes as we share life’s journey with one another!

Sometimes we are the givers, the sharers of hope, other times we are the receivers, the ones with sadness and struggle and others offer us presence and hope. These are the ways we meet and recognize Jesus and they are the ways in which our experience of God, of Jesus, of sharing God’s word, of breaking bread and celebrating in community transforms us to give birth to God’s love in our midst. When we live and witness our beliefs, our faith, our own experience of God’s faithful love and mercy, we make God and God’s love more visible; God brings our love to birth and in our praise and witness of that love, we join the long line of witnesses who continue to spread the Good News of Jesus’ coming, Jesus’ reign in our world, we join Carol on her journey to live fully.

So, let us continue our celebration of Sister Carol’s 50 year commitment. Let us join our hearts and spirits with Paul’s words to the Ephesians, praying for one another that God may give each one power through the Holy Spirit for their hidden selves to grow strong, for Christ to live in our hearts through faith, until knowing the love of Christ, we become filled with the utter fullness of God and, in giving glory to God, we share our experience in many ways and others come to know the all-holy God in their own lives.