

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2009

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Happy and I have family in Texas, principally in Houston and Fort Worth. I had the pleasure some years ago of celebrating two weddings of nieces in Houston, actually Cypress, Texas, and, quite recently, that of a nephew in Fort Worth.

The Houston weddings were in a mid-size Episcopal Church; the Fort Worth wedding was not. It was in a real Texas non-denomination mega-church. It was enormous.

The service was in the church's chapel, somewhat larger than our entire church. Having a few minutes, I thought I would take a tour of the rest of the complex. There was a lobby: it was called "gathering space," but it was a lobby – it was huge. There were three or four kiosks with Starbucks coffee. To one side was the entrance to the Christian Education space, which bore a clear resemblance to an amusement park.

Past the lobby, through one of many doors, was the worship space. The first thing to see was a console for electronics: lights, music, and whatever else. It took up almost the entire back of the space. The place was huge: I would say it seated five thousand. Up front was a

stage flanked by giant projection screens. There was a sort of lectern, no altar, no religious symbols of any kind. I must confess I couldn't see how the church differed from a shopping mall or an auditorium. What set it apart from the world of everyday life outside its doors? Perhaps that's not what they intended; perhaps the people who attend there simply don't care.

I also thought about the church's very antithesis, those who completely reject the world. In the extreme, there are still ascetic hermits in the forest, living on nuts and berries. We don't see them because we are not supposed to see them. We see Franciscans who have given up most of the clutter of our culture and taken on a life of poverty. There are still monasteries, communities of deeply religious people who live simply with less. And there are the Amish, the Mennonites, out here in this world living very happily without automobiles, computers, electric lights, the latest fashions, and all the stuff most of us cannot do without.

Once when traveling from Wisconsin to Georgia, we stopped at a rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike for lunch. In the entryway was a machine to tell your blood pressure. There was a line of Amish men and women at the machine, all in their traditional clothing, all having their blood pressure checked. I have no idea how they got there; I did wonder if they actually had blood pressure, living as they did without the trappings of our age.

Jesus prayed that His Disciples, and that would be us, should be "in the world, but not of the world." We don't really have much choice about the first part; we cannot deny the world in which we live, nor should we. If we do we run the real risk of becoming a quaint anachronism and, frankly, irrelevant. Attractive as the thought of dropping out might be, and sometimes it is, we, as Christians are not called to quit this world.

On the other hand, if our lives are so filled with the sights and the sounds and the materialism of the world around us, where is there

room for God? How can we hear Him in the noise of our world? How can we feel His presence in the midst of the distractions? Where do we go if this is all there is?

There must be another way, another answer to the question “what are we doing here?”

It seems to me that you and I, as Christians, are called to community, not personal isolation. It is very easy to become isolated in this world, despite all our electronic contacts: we can isolate ourselves by withdrawing from the world, and we can isolate ourselves in the midst of a crowd in the biggest church in the world.

Neither example is our role, our purpose. We are here in this world to transform the world, not to deny it and not to be submerged in it; we are here to participate in this world. It begins here, at this altar, and it proceeds out there, beyond our walls, proclaiming that God is present in the lives of His children, that He is the source of all we have, all we are and all that we may be.

In His Holy Name.