Sermon, May 1, 2022

John 14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we are celebrating one of our lesser feast days. May 1 is the Feast Day of St. Philip and St. James. When I first learned that today was the Feast Day of Philip and James, I immediately thought of one of my favorite Bible stories. I love the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Our Lectionary Sunday School class just studied this story in Acts a few weeks ago. I thought I could preach on that story…until I found out that Philip is not the Philip remembered today.

That Philip is Philip the Evangelist. This Philip is one of the apostles. In case you are nervous that you don’t know enough about the Bible, now you know that even this supposed expert can always learn something new!

I’ll paraphrase what I found out about Philip and James from two websites: The Divine Mercy and our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Newark, Delaware.

May 1 has been observed as the Feast Day of St. Philip and St. James since 560, when their remains were moved to the newly built Church of the Holy Apostles in Rome. There is not a clear reason for them to be observed on the same day, except that they both were devoted to the Gospel and were both martyred for their faith. Also, their remains arrived together at the church, so they are sharing the same feast day.

We hear more of Philip in the gospels than James. While mentioned in the lists of the disciples in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts, we know the most about him in John’s gospel. Philip was from a small fishing village in Galilee. One of the first disciples called after Peter and Andrew, he was the one who brought Nathanael to Jesus.

Philip posed the question to Jesus about where to buy bread to feed 5000 men. We hear about Philip in today’s gospel, where he makes a request to Jesus at the last supper. Tradition holds that after preaching with Bartholomew in Greece, he was imprisoned, and then crucified upside down in 62 A.D.

James was referred to as James the Less, not for his importance but for his age. He is often called James the Younger as well. This James is not the James, the son of Zebedee, with whom we may be more familiar.

Some hold that this James is the author of the book of James. There is no other mention of him in the gospels other than appearing on the same disciples lists as Philip. He may be the James who defends Paul’s mission to the Gentiles in Acts 15.

His martyrdom came in 62 A.D. when Jewish leaders accused him of breaking the Law. He was taken by a mob to the top of the Temple and pressured to deny his claim that Jesus was the Messiah. When he refused, they pushed him off the Temple. Surviving the fall, he finally died when someone struck him on the head with a club.

Philip, not James, is the one we hear about in today’s gospel. Jesus and his other disciples are gathered for the Passover meal. It will be Jesus’s last Passover with them, his last supper before his crucifixion.

Philip makes a request of Jesus. Show us the Father and we will be satisfied. Now Philip has been with Jesus as one of his first disciples. In the first chapter of John, Jesus goes to Galilee and finds him.

Jesus says only…follow me. And Philip does. With only two words from Jesus, Philip drops everything and becomes one of his disciples.

How does he start his life as a disciple? He goes to his friend, Nathanael, and tells him that they have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth.

Philip continues to follow Jesus and to witness his miracles and to hear his teachings. Then at the Passover meal, he wants one more thing. It would be the thing that would make all the rest fall into place. Then, they’ll be satisfied. They’ll be assured that Jesus is truly the Son of God, if he can show them God himself.

I can just picture Jesus shaking his head at Philip. He says…have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me?

Jesus has shown him his identity over and over again. His belief in Jesus as the messiah was what drew Philip to follow him in the first place. Now that he has witnessed all that Jesus said and did, he should be convinced all the more.

Jesus calls him to believe that Jesus and the Father, God, are one in the same. God works through Jesus in their symbiotic relationship. Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus.

If that is too much to ask of Philip, Jesus says he should believe him because of the works themselves. For John, the works of Jesus are the catalyst for belief in him. The ending of his gospel tells readers that it was written so that they may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

However belief comes, from Jesus’ words that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, or from his many works, belief will be powerful. The one who believes in Jesus will not only do works like Jesus did, but even greater ones.

Jesus will no longer be on earth to perform his works. That will be the time when those who come after him, those who believe in him, will truly begin their work.

Matthew tells us that there was a time that the disciples were unable to cure a man’s son of a demon. He brings the boy to Jesus for the disciples were unable to heal him. Jesus instantly cures the boy. The disciples come to Jesus later and ask how it was that they failed. Jesus comments on their little faith. But he also says with just a small amount of faith, they could move mountains.

Here in John, Jesus tells Philip and the others that they will do great works in his place. He will do for them whatever they ask, if they ask it in his name. Anything at all.

This is a very challenging exhortation from Jesus. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it. How many times have you prayed, ending with…in Jesus’ name…and the prayer was not answered as you had asked?

Have you ever prayed for a new job and someone else got it? Have you prayed to heal a relationship and you and the other person parted company? Have you ever prayed for someone to get well from an illness, and they died?

It would be easy to blame yourself for not having enough faith. I have heard of many people who left the church and their faith for being accused of not having enough faith. If only you had enough faith, you wouldn’t be unemployed. Your marriage would have survived. It’s your fault that your loved one died because you are not faithful enough.

Yes, there have been times when prayer has made a situation turn out as we desired. There is no discrediting that. But to place blame on a person for not having enough faith is not what Jesus wants us to do either.

Jesus is not a genie in a bottle. We don’t rub it and Jesus grants our every whim. If that were true, I’d have gotten so many puppies when I was child, I wouldn’t have known what to do with them all. I’d have a couple million dollars in the bank and could do my pastor work for free. My mother would not have died when I was barely twenty one.

This encounter with Philip is the very beginning of the farewell discourse in John. Jesus will give instructions, advice and encouragement to his disciples over the next four chapters.

The works that the disciples will do will be done so that God will be glorified through his Son. The next section of Jesus’ discourse is about his commandment. What is that commandment that he gave his disciples around the Passover table? To love one another as Jesus loved them.

Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians tells them not to lose heart. They are to continue to proclaim the gospel, no matter what. They are not to make God’s word fit their own situation, but to fit their situation into God’s word. They are not to put a different “spin” on Jesus’ words to make them look better to the world.

They are to shine God’s light into the world. This light is the love of God. Love is the most powerful force there is, as God is love.

Paul also says to the Corinthians in his first letter that the greatest of hope, faith and love is love. Without love, all his actions are meaningless.

Perhaps Jesus is telling his disciples that when they work in faithful service, they are showing the kind of love that glorifies God. They are not working to bring glory to themselves. but to God who works through them.

Whenever God is glorified, our prayers are answered. God’s will is done, even when that means that our will isn’t done. It’s part of the mystery of God.

If all the faithful people in the world got together and prayed for world peace, do you think it would happen? Wouldn’t that be an irrefutable sign of God’s love for us? Wouldn’t that be the ultimate glory for God, for all the world to come to belief?

And yet, here we are. Russia attacks Ukraine for no reasonable purpose. The news is full of senseless shootings, murders and other mayhem. Students in our schools have to practice intruder drills. Homeless and hungry people come to our shelter and food bank and PAL lunch just to get through another day.

Maybe like our psalmist today, we ask….Lord, why are you sleeping? But also like our psalmist, we pray…save us, for the sake of your steadfast love.

We will not know a perfect world until Jesus comes again. In the meantime, we are to keep our faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. We are continue to make our petitions to God and to ask for our desires. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus.

Even if we falter and doubt, like Thomas, we will still be called to be Jesus’ disciples. Even when we want more proof of God, like Philip, we are called to work in Jesus’ name. Even if we lose heart like the Corinthians, we call on God to strengthen us for our work.

Today we remember the works of Philip and James. They went out into the world to spread the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. That word of love is still being spread today, through us. Let us glorify God through our faithful acts of love, done in Jesus’ name. Amen.