

Sixth Sunday of Easter – A
[Acts 8: 5-8, 14-17; Psalm 66; 1Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21]

“I can’t stand it anymore!” “I’ve just got to get out!” How often have we heard that? How often have we felt and said it ourselves? For weeks now we have been living under a “Stay at Home” advisory because of COVID- 19. We get it, it’s necessary, but it does take a toll. Especially now that the weather is more spring-like, we are all feeling a strong urge to get outside of our dwelling places, and it feels so good that we can. It is like breathing in new life.

There is another sense, too, in which we feel the need to get outside, not only to breathe in life but also to communicate it. As Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, there resides within us an urgency to move out of ourselves into the world with the message of the Gospel. The need to do this is particularly acute right now. Throughout the last two months of pandemic, people everywhere have been turning to God in the awareness of need, and toward one another in a spirit of compassion. But as minds now begin to focus on a return to life as it was before the pandemic, there is a real risk that this may all be forgotten. The temptation will be very strong to return to those unhealthy habits by which we turn away from God and hence grow apart from one another. To announce the Gospel is to keep before everyone the need to have our attention always riveted on God, to trust not in ourselves but in Him, and to remain in the love of Christ by loving one another as he has loved us. So, we Christians do, indeed, need to get out of the house so that the message of the Gospel be heard.

It is precisely this missionary impulse of the Christian heart that is the focus of scriptural instruction this morning. The texts from Sacred Scripture direct our reflection, first, to the source of our motivation and, second, to what must be done as we respond to it.

The Christian impulse to get outside, to move out of oneself toward the other, is rooted in God’s own desire to “get out of the house,” if you will. God, who needs nothing because He is, in Himself, a perfect communion of love, is moved by the dynamic of His own love to “step outside” and come to the aid of his people to give them life. God moved outside Himself for our sake by sending us His Son, who was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and bore the name of Jesus. Today’s Gospel passage from St. John has Jesus about to return home to the Father, and promising his disciples that God will move outside of Himself in a new way by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This gift, the Holy Spirit, is what prompts us, as disciples of Jesus, to “get out of the house”, to give witness to others of the freedom, peace and joy of life in Christ. We see this urgency on beautiful display in the missionary journeys and actions undertaken by Saints Peter, John and Philip in the reading from *Acts*. They and the other Apostles had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and now could not hold back. Once we have been touched by the Spirit of God, and have allowed ourselves to be seized by the life and love He pours into our hearts, we simply cannot keep to ourselves the beauty of the Gospel. We’ve just got to get out.

When we do step out, though, what must we do? What does it mean to respond to this impulse within us? St. Peter summarizes what is asked of us. “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” We are seeing some sense of hope returning to our land as medical restrictions are gradually lifted, and we, too, certainly join in the happiness that accompanies these developments. Yet this is a worldly hope,

which in consequence is fleeting, as we now know only too well. It is not the kind of hope St. Peter has in mind. The Gospel announces that there is the possibility of a far greater and more durable hope, one that comes from knowing and following Jesus Christ. As we respond to the Spirit's impulse, we are called to share with others this hope, and Jesus as the reason we hold it.

Now, even though everyone is by this point viscerally aware of the need for true hope, this does not mean that the Christian message – and its messengers – will always receive a warm welcome. History, and our own experience, confirm that the announcement carried by the Church does not always receive a ready and joyful acceptance. In our day, I've noticed that, much like people out for a stroll will give one another a wide berth for the sake of physical distancing, society generally is steering clear of the Christian message to establish what is felt to be safe separation from the Gospel. As a result, we Christians find ourselves encouraged not to venture out, to “stay at home,” to keep our faith to ourselves, or confine it to our services of worship, so as not to bring it into public discourse. Why would this be?

Consider again these words of Jesus as he describes the promised Holy Spirit: “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive...” Here, “world” as used by St. John refers to life lived apart from Christ, who is the Truth. It is, therefore, life that has grown comfortable with falsehood and lies, whether that be the deceptions perpetrated by others or those we tell ourselves. Such a world cannot receive the Truth because it has become closed to it. In consequence, it will deliver even to God its own stay-at-home advisory. Don't bother us! As Christians who live in the Truth by virtue of the Holy Spirit, we cannot but expect the same reaction.

This can give rise within us to hesitation and fear. Just as people may choose to stay at home for fear of the virus, even though they feel the urge to get out, so, too, the dread of rejection may prove stronger than our desire to give witness, and cause us to keep to ourselves, to hide our Christian identity, and not proclaim the Gospel. Here we need to remember two important points. First, Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of truth but also the Advocate. The *Catechism* tells us that this term, Advocate, means, literally, “he who is called to one's side” (CCC, 692). The Holy Spirit accompanies us in all that we do, inspiring our action and granting us protection. And second, as the example of St. Philip reminds us, the proclamation of the Gospel has unsurpassable power to heal. In our day, there is deep and widespread hurt among all of God's children for a host of reasons. Only the Good News of God's love, revealed in Christ and poured out in the Holy Spirit, can bring to everyone the healing for which we long. We cannot allow any fear to keep us from announcing that.

So, let's obey the impulse and, without fear, get out of the house. Our world needs the Gospel of Christ urgently, and, by our Baptism and Confirmation, we Christians have been both blessed and empowered by God with the beautiful mission of making it known.

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St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)
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