Rogation Sunday

Sixth Sunday of Easter (C)|| May 25, 2025 || 9:30am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Grace to you and peace from God, our father and mother, and from our Lord and Holy Gardener Jesus Christ.

Good morning – It is 5.25.25 - that must be something special, isn't it?

We finally have a beautiful day after cold and prohibitively inclement weather, and I am so pleased that we are together and able to mark this Memorial Day Weekend together, to celebrate our second to last Sunday of Easter and to learn and inwardly digest a bit about Rogation Sunday.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus is beginning to prepare the disciples and each of us that he will ascend to heaven to be with God in a short time. He wants the disciples – and each of us – to remember his teachings and to have no fear, that even though he will ascend, even though he is going away, He will be with us. And this morning he says a bit about the Holy Spirit, the third divine incarnation of God, whom we will celebrate and get to know on Pentecost! Anytime I read this passage from John, I think of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus refers to as the Advocate, as our heavenly attorney...

Jesus is reassuring his followers – and each of us – that all shall be well, even if we cannot see him, we are to be assured of his presence and his love for us – just as we are to demonstrate our love for God and our belonging to the Way by loving one another.

This Sunday is also Rogation Sunday, which may not be among the church celebrations that is familiar to you. The term Rogation comes from the Latin verb Rogare, which means "to ask". In the ancient church, Rogation days were observed for three or four days preceding the feast of the ascension when Christians would fast and pray, asking for God's mercy and protection for the crops and the harvests.

We may have combined our Christian observances with the Druid ritual aimed at appeasing the god Robigus who was associated with mold and rust – so the Druids and other branches of paganism would process through the fields praying to Robigus to keep the crops safe and free of rot and mold.

Sometime during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First, to whom we Episcopalians owe several debts of gratitude. She liked rules, and having things written down, so sometime between 1558 and 1603, Elizabeth declared that during the observance of Rogation days clergy and parishioners were to walk the parish boundaries, stopping at regular intervals to pray and seek God's protection for the land and blessing for the pending harvest.

These sojourns, which came to be known as – Beating of the Bounds, included the clergy or altar servers hitting property markers or some key natural part of the boundary like a rock or a special tree – with willow wands– and saying prayers for intervention and blessing. These annual inspections also offered an opportunity to inspect walls, clear brush and make sure that paths were unencumbered.

These Walk Abouts were also intended to reconnect the priest with all who lived within his (it was a good long while before women would be priested) his parish boundaries, whether they were Anglican or not, the clergyman could stop in for a quick pastoral visit.

As the boundary markers were attended to or maintained, the prayers offered were in thanksgiving for shared nature and the resources that the land provided.

It is rumored – though not clear as a regular practice, that they used to make the boundary markers memorable for the boys who traveled or participated in the procession – by holding them upside down or frightening them at some strategic spot in the boundary plot in order to make the spot indelible in their memories. There were few maps at the time, so knowing and remembering the boundaries of parishes was vitally important.

An ancillary benefit for these Rogation Day processions was community building for curious on-lookers or neighbors who were not yet church goers.

Perhaps next year we'll take a turn around the St. Andrew's campus for Rogation Sunday. We could see and appreciate all of the natural beauty that surrounds us. We could also remember and give thanks for the people who planted the flowers and ivy and have maintained our stone walls through the years.

I have been wondering about whether we might plant a tree to give thanks and memorialize each of the clergy members who has served and loved this community, particularly those in our recent history whose tenures were shorter than planned.

On Thursday, at Jackie Hauser's funeral service, her family brought plants that were from her yard or had been perpetuated or grafted from her efforts. We are still the beneficiaries of those efforts. Jackie's efforts are still very beautiful.

I was struck by what a wonderful combination of Rogation Day and Memorial Day this lovely effort was. For each of us who were gifted one of these plants, we will remember Jackie and give thanks for her life and service in this community as we enjoy the plants' growth and development. As a parish our community grew and expanded on Thursday through Jackie's word of mouth, and because of the beautiful hospitality that was offered, even as we are grieving her loss.

As we take this official turn toward summer this weekend, I hope that each of us will find a way to connect to nature and to give thanks for its beauty. Rogation Sunday is an opportunity to experience God in nature and to remember Jesus' promise to be with us always.

Perhaps digging in our gardens, or enjoying a freshly grown vegetable can be the antidote to the scary or distracting noise that is available to agitate or unsettle us any time we turn on or read the news.

If you feel your heart quicken, or some ire rising, think about those early clergy people who would ride around for days, marking the boundaries of their parishes, greeting their community members and making sure their walls and boundaries were blessed, holy and passable. There is a lesson for each of us, to be outside talking with neighbors, and an invitation to ask for God's blessing for our efforts to make the world a bit more beautiful by offering love and presence. Amen+