

Fr. Keith Boisvert
26 August 2018
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Howard Thurman, the African- American theologian, educator, and preacher, remembers (in his “Forty-Day Journal”) the summer night when Haley’s Comet appeared in 1910. At the time, Howard was ten years old and living in Florida. He writes: *One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her to the backyard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eye off it, “What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?” There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, “Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.” In that moment something was touched and kindled in me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fears and stilled my panic.*

When the 70-year Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report was released recently, I experienced a similar level of anxiety as Howard Thurman did facing that comet. So many questions raised; and no clear answers. So many people hurt; so little accountability by leaders. So much evidence piled up; so little action. But I have to share with you that I have also reached the peace that 10-year-old Howard Thurman was able to reach with his mother’s assurance: “*God will take care of us.*” I want to thank many of you who have e-mailed and spoken with me in the last week with words of support for me and for our faith community—for this has helped me to reach that peace, and reassured me that God is indeed present in our midst in this difficult time as a church. We mourn God’s absence in times of pain and despair—but we are able to experience that God can be discovered in acts of love, generosity, support, and healing extended to us by others. That’s how “*God will take care of us.*” That’s how we are able to take care of those who have been hurt.

A number of people have told me that they (or friends they talk with) are questioning their faith, or their membership in the Church. Some even e-mailed me stating that they did not come to

Mass last weekend in protest. Many are struggling with how to handle the information that has come our way from a neighboring state, and wondering what to do at this point. It seems, in a way, to be a decisive moment for many, a time for a decision.

So many of our choices are mundane, so ordinary that we give them little thought, and they are quickly forgotten. Will we get up with the alarm or snooze an extra nine minutes? Wear the red dress or the black one? Eat a donut for breakfast or fruit? But then there are some choices that are clearly profound and life-altering. Will we pursue a career in medicine... or dance? Will we ask for his/her hand in marriage... or accept such an offer? Will we have the medical treatment or surgery... or not? Will we risk starting our own business... or stick with the job and benefits already secure? Will we speak up against an injustice, or rush toward danger to help save a life... or will we just keep quiet and safe, assuming someone else will do it?

These are the moments that define our lives, the hinges upon which the great doors of our personal history swing. We all have a handful of these defining moments, and the way we choose at these crucial crossroads tends to bless or haunt us for the rest of our lives. Often military battles have a moment when the outcome of the battle swings on a general's strategic move, or an individual soldier's decision. Often a sporting event has a moment when the momentum shifts, and the game is won or lost, based upon some dramatic choice made by a coach or player. Each one of us here can, no doubt, name the crucial choices that determined so much of the path of our lives.

The scripture readings today reveal two such defining moments for God's people. In the story taken from the book of Joshua, Joshua exhorts the people of Israel to remember how they are God's chosen people-- the nation of descendants God promised to the patriarchs, rescued from the slavery of Egypt, preserved through the wilderness wandering, and to whom God gave the Promised Land. Now, toward the end of Joshua's life, after the Israelites had spent a generation living in the Promised Land, Joshua calls the people to make a conscious choice. He calls God's chosen people to choose God back!

And so, God's **chosen** people also had to be God's **choosing** people. This was a critical moment for Israel, a defining moment as important as when they crossed the Red Sea on dry land. For it was the moment that the people had to stand on their own choices, to act on the freedom God

gave them when he rescued them from slavery. After all God's redemptive deeds, they still had a real choice to make-- to voluntarily and lovingly serve and worship God, or to worship the gods of the pagan neighbors around them. Before the people could even answer, Joshua made his own choice abundantly clear: "*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*" On that day, all of Israel followed Joshua's lead, saying: "*We, also, will serve the Lord, for he is our God.*" Good choice-- and, at least on that day, they really meant it.

In the gospel reading, Jesus posed just as crucial a choice to his followers. This moment in the story comes just as many of the followers of Jesus decided to stop being disciples. They found his teaching to be too difficult, and his lifestyle too challenging. So they chose to abandon the cause, and the messiah who was leading it. And at that moment, when prospects for the growth of the Kingdom movement start looking bleaker, Jesus asked his remaining followers, "*Will you also leave?*" It was a defining moment, to be sure. But it was a real choice they had to make.

And it is a choice that each one of us has to make today. We can place ourselves in these two scripture readings. Joshua could lead us in a reflection on how God has been active in various phases of our lives (looking back)... and, today, we still have to consciously choose God back-- to voluntarily and lovingly serve and worship God. We may discover that people who once sat around us here at Mass are no longer here regularly because of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report... and, today, we can hear Jesus asking us, "*Will you also leave?*"

I want to point out that major decisions-- changing jobs, marrying, beginning a family, pursuing medical treatment--- always involve a leap of faith. You can explore a particular company, do thorough marriage preparation, or research a particular treatment. But we can never know with certainty how the job will suit us, how the marriage will evolve, or how the treatment will affect our body. The biggest decisions in life involve big trust and big faith.

It's no different for a choice about staying in the Church at this point, as a priest or as a parishioner. I've had several conversations with other priests who are asking "*Do I want to remain and serve as a priest in a church like this?*" I have come to peace with the fact that we have reached a very painful but cleansing point in our journey as a Church. Even if too slow for some, it seems finally that the facts are being confronted, victims are being cared for, and leaders are being held accountable. It is important that we remain vigilant on the issue of accountability.

And policies and procedures put in place over the last fifteen years are having an effect. It was reported that only two of the 1000 cases in Pennsylvania occurred in the last ten years. That is still two too many, but does indicate that something has dramatically changed. And so, in a leap of faith, I promise to be here next week to celebrate the Eucharist with you, so that we can experience together this very special assurance of God's presence in our midst: Christ himself, and in that Eucharist to be assured that "*God will take care of us.*"