

John F. Carter

St. John's Episcopal Church

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VI, Rogation Sunday

Easter

## ROGATION (ASKING) SUNDAY

Yesterday, I transplanted a really miserable rhododendron from a place it never should have been. We don't always get planted where we can bloom. This one never got any direct sunlight, the deer attacked it without mercy last winter, and when I dug it up I could see a pool of water drowning the roots. Right now it is completely stripped of leaves but the stems are still alive and have some small buds on them. So with several grunts and a prayer the intervention is complete and the rhody is now in a new home. Sometimes it takes an outside source for healing to take place. I hope this plant grows.

Today is Rogation Sunday, a day that used to be very important in the agricultural cycle of sowing, planting and harvesting. And you thought it was Mother's Day! Of course it *is* Mother's Day, and perhaps there is an intuitive connection between that celebration and Rogation Sunday. Tomorrow, Tuesday and Wednesday are known as the "minor rogations", the three days before Ascension, which is this coming Thursday. Ascension is forty days after Easter and ten days before Pentecost.

The word, "rogation", comes from the Latin, *rogo, rogare* to ask. Traditionally, the gospel for this Sunday included Jesus teaching the disciples that whatever they *ask* in his name will be

granted. What is being asked of God on the three days of Rogation is a blessing on the spring fields and recently birthed livestock. Rogation was first introduced in 470 AD by a Bishop Mamertus. It later incorporated existing Roman spring rites and became part of the Christian calendar, observed later by both Catholic and Anglican churches in the Northern hemisphere.

In England, Rogation days blended with the old Roman Festival of “terminalia” or “boundaries”. Boundary lines and demarcations between country parishes were often unclear, especially where there were large open fields. In order to reestablish the boundaries and to teach the next generation where the property lines were, it was the custom in the spring to go around and “beat the boundaries”. There was a procession of clergy, churchwardens and choirboys, who would proceed around the boundary and pray for the vitality of the parish and for its protection in the coming year. We can enter into the rogation spirit and ask for the same blessings for St. John’s. Maybe next year we could have our own procession outside singing as we go around the property lines!

In the 1630s, Anglican priest and poet, George Herbert, described four reasons for rogation processions:

- 1) A blessing of God for the fruits of the field.
- 2) Justice in the preservation of bounds.
- 3) Charity in loving, walking and the neighborly accompanying one another with reconciling of differences at the time, if there be any.
- 4) *Mercie*, in relieving the poor by a liberal distribution of largesse, which at the time is to be used.

At springtime in New England, there is an irresistible primal force that moves us to abandon sorting through dusty indoor closets and gets us out into the open air, digging in the dirt, planting, sniffing, walking around our yards, checking our boundaries. Nature's procreative energy is alive in plants and animals and romance blooms in human beings as well.

I recently visited a lady in her mid-90s. She is sharp but physically a little frail. Her caregivers admonish her to stay inside unless she has help. But her passion for the outdoors and her gardens had other plans. The other morning, her son told me with obvious delight, she could not resist the fragrant call of creation. She went outside on her own to tend to some flowers on her lawn. Why not? We are not dealing with insignificant powers here. There is deep blessing and healing in the air.

Perhaps Robert Frost had Rogation and "beating the boundaries" in mind when he wrote "Mending Wall", a droll poem about him and his neighbor getting together in the spring to repair the stonewall that was their common boundary.

"We keep the wall between us once again.

To each the boulders have fallen to each...

We wear our fingers out with them.

Oh, just another kind of out of door game,"

With Frost's mending of walls and the ancient rogation processions, our deep and mysterious connection with

creation is re-established. Nature nurtures the human spirit. Amnesia of this spiritual kinship imperils the healing of souls and the survival of the planet itself.

One part of nature that has long been associated with faith and healing is water. In the first lesson for today from Acts, Lydia is converted near the river and then baptized in it. The Epistle from Revelation describes “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Jesus)”. In today’s gospel, Jesus approaches a man who has been at a healing pool called Beth-zatha for 38 years. When Jesus sees him lying there and knows that he has been there a very long time he asks the man, “Do you want to be made well?” It was believed that angels stirred up the water from time to time and that the optimal healing power was present when the water was agitated in this way. We might expect the man to respond to Jesus’ question saying, “Of course I want to be healed and made well. That is why I am here.” But he does not really answer Jesus’ question. He says, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

What is it about being sick or wounded or victimized that is appealing? What is the gain of remaining ill? What is the risk of being made well? If the man is healed he will have to give up dependency and take responsibility for himself. Change can be scary even if it looks promising. Perhaps we can identify with the entropic pull of passivity of this man. It is easy to mistake moaning for meaning. It is easy to postpone the thing we know we have to do. Sometimes, as in the case of my struggling rhododendron, a compassionate intervention is required.

Jesus does not respond to the man's evasive response. Rather, he says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Jesus sees something in the man that he himself cannot see for himself or has forgotten ... why he came to the healing pool in the first place. The man has perhaps become inured to the comfort and safety of hanging out at the well. Comfort, routine and predictability have great appeal but probably no real potential for growth.

When we come to church what do we expect to find? When I first started attending church as an adult, at first I wanted comfort more than challenge. While comfort, solace and familiarity can be important, if they are all that we come for and stay for, it will be hard hear Jesus say "stand up and walk". Jesus saw potential in the man. Imagine that Jesus sees a promise and potential for healing and growth in each of us, perhaps something about ourselves that we have forgotten. On Rogation Sunday, "Asking Sunday", what do we bring to the healing pool? What do we ask for? Can we imagine Jesus seeing something buried in us that he calls to life and renewal, asking us to stand up and walk?

A powerful squall came up last Tuesday. Suddenly the wind was blowing with great force. The temperature plummeted 15 degrees in as many minutes. Later, I saw a number of large limbs and trees down. The power went off in the church three times during the storm. At home, I stood inside and watched with worry as the large tulip poplar in our yard was pummeled by gusty punches. I feared that the tree, now in full leaf, might shatter. When the most severe blast of air slammed it, small to medium sized branches broke off and flew away. But the tree survived the onslaught. Every little branch it surrendered meant that there was less for the wind

to grab hold of. Less resistance, more strength. Letting go is a means of healing. The wisdom of the tree.

Pretend that Jesus has just told us to stand up and walk ... together in a rogation parade, to process to the boundaries of what we know and then beyond, to walk with renewed strength like the man who was healed, into new places we can only just begin to imagine.

Now let's stand up ...