

May 22, 2011  
Easter 5, Year A  
Acts 7:55-60  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we're still here.<sup>1</sup> I don't know what the "End" yesterday was supposed to be like, Rapture or some other zany notion. It makes me angry, just another thing to mock Christians, to discount, ignore Jesus. It embarrasses me. But I should lighten up and have some empathy for all the folks eagerly anticipating the end of time. Most people looking for a dramatic in-breaking of God, a showy display of judgment, they probably are quite distressed, feeling alienated, dispossessed. They're deeply anxious.

I relate more to the anxieties raised at the beginning of the year when The Wall Street Journal published an article called "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior." It contained excerpts from Amy Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, and she appeared to advocate very strict parenting: no sleepovers, no play dates, no TV, no computer games.

Chua, who teaches at Yale, required her two girls not only to get 'A's in every subject other than gym and drama, but also to be the best in the class. One of her children came in second in a math competition, and the girl had to do 2000 math problems each night until she returned to the top. When Lulu, Chua's seven year old daughter, had trouble playing a piece of piano music, she had to practice straight through dinner and into the night, no breaks for water or the bathroom, until she got it right. Chua said, "I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic."

The article sparked intense, sensational controversy, delighting some and sending others into paroxysms of outrage. It pricked American anxieties that we're in decline, being overtaken by the Chinese, becoming second rate. It also pricked our anxieties about parenting: are we too soft and indulgent or too harsh and demanding? How am I ruining my child? We'd probably be a lot saner if we allowed ourselves some mistakes. Our children would be saner, too.

Jesus said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." (Mt 11:28) I doubt that all our stress and longing for achievement helps us to draw closer to God. What are our priorities?

Of all the chatter and hissy fits about the tiger mom, one response to her made me roar with laughter. David Brooks called Chua a wimp: "I believe she's

coddling her children. She's protecting them from the most intellectually demanding activities because she doesn't understand what's cognitively difficult and what isn't."<sup>2</sup>

Brooks argued that practicing music for four hours isn't nearly as cognitively demanding as a sleepover with 14 year old girls. I'd be willing to raise the stakes and bet that it's not only cognitively more difficult, but also emotionally and spiritually more difficult as well as quite likely being more rewarding and enjoyable. Brooks' point is that a school dance, a birthday party, a sports event – these can easily be more demanding and intimidating than ten hours of homework. The social, relational experiences are often more important in growing and maturing.

Brooks says that “managing status rivalries, negotiating group dynamics, understanding social norms, navigating the distinction between self and group” – these skills are far more difficult to learn, and not only that, Brooks says that they're more important for achievement. Sure, but more important than achievement, these skills help us to work with other people, to be closer to other people, to have stronger relationships.

The most important part of being human – the thing that really makes us human – is our relationships with other people. Can we have real, deep intimacy with other people? Can we enter a group and cooperate, instead of compete? Can we work with others? Can we deal appropriately with their foibles as well as recognize and appreciate their strengths? Can we trust people who are different than us? Can we be open to others, empathize with others? Can we be aware of each other's emotions?

In a few moments the Holy Spirit will come upon Jennifer, John, and Logan and will make them part of the body of Christ, the Church, this community of diverse and strange and difficult and wonderful people. The Church, like each of us, has positive and negative parts. It's a mixture of things we like and things we don't like.

The good news is that God accepts all of us, the good and the bad bits. Baptism shows us God's acceptance of us. We can't earn his welcome. Rather, he accepts us freely, gladly, eagerly. In the font, the womb of the Church, we are born again. We have unity with God and receive the identity of Jesus, and we become children of God. God adopts us, and we become his forever, no matter what we do. We may wander away, but we are always his children, and he always wants us participating in his family. God raises his children, nurtures us, through Holy Communion. He gives us food so that we can have life and grow. Like baptism, we can't earn it. We can't deserve it. It's a gift.

Today's gospel is from Jesus' so-called "farewell discourse" – chapters 14 to 17 of John. Jesus is preparing to leave his friends. The disciples have troubled hearts. He's leaving, and they don't know what's next, what life will be like without him there. Jesus is trying to reassure them that his going away is not an end, but a beginning, that their sorrow and loss will be transformed to joy and renewal, that they will experience his presence with them in a new way.

For three years I went to seminary, and I mostly busted my gut trying to learn about God, to understand Christian doctrine, to master the basics of theology. It was an intellectually rich experience. I'm all for rigorous academics, and believe that it enriches life, but I doubt that my academic work was most important in helping me to really know God, to grow as a child of God.

For three years, Jesus' disciples followed him around, and today's gospel, the end of that time together, Thomas and Phillip still don't get who Jesus is. They're still lost. They still don't understand. "Have I been so long with you Phillip, and yet you don't know me?"

The disciples came to know Jesus more fully when he rose from the dead and as they took up Christ's responsibility for his ministry in the world, as they worked and fought with each other, as they figured out how to spread the gospel, as they baptized and celebrated communion, as they prayed.

When I look back a couple decades to my seminary days, I think what may have helped me to grow in Christ had far less to do with hitting the books than with working on a prayer life, going to mass, and especially living in the seminary community. It seemed like a nut bin to me, and there was lots of evidence for that view. But in retrospect, God seems so much more present in community life – God there pushing me to try to accept people with significant differences, to try to cooperate with people I found irritating, to try to appreciate the gifts of others, to try to trust and empathize with others.

After Jesus left the disciples, they learned that Jesus was present to them in each other. Their hearts didn't need to be troubled. When we baptize this morning, we're saying, "God is in you. The living and risen Jesus rises up out of that font with you and in you and through you."

"Let not your heart be troubled." If your heart is troubled, the way forward, Jesus says, is: "Believe in God, believe also in me." For John, belief isn't about intellectual agreement. Rather belief is about being committed to Christ. Jesus is saying, "If your heart is troubled, look around, connect with another person and see me alive in that person, be committed to other people."

In a few moments, I'll ask, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" And we'll say, "I will with God's help." That's the achievement that matters, and it's a gift from God.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hour of the Apocalypse Passes Quietly, Believers Confused and Philosophical,” The Washington Post, AP, May 22: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hour-of-the-apocalypse-passes-quietly-believers-confused-and-philosophical/2011/05/22/AFiVS28G\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hour-of-the-apocalypse-passes-quietly-believers-confused-and-philosophical/2011/05/22/AFiVS28G_story.html)

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, “Amy Chua is a Wimp,” The New York Times, January 17, 2011.