

Seventh Sunday in Easter

Acts 1:1-14

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As some of you who know, for years, we were immersed as a family in Native American Spirituality. As the Religion Teacher at Notre Dame High School, it was one of the topics I taught within the World Religion Module. One of the most powerful experiences is a 4-day complete fast, totally isolated, exposed to whatever nature sends, and confined within a small sacred space. The ceremony is called "Vision Quest." The intent of this very demanding ceremony is to try to discern God's call and to prepare oneself to live it out. Doing one Vision Quest for four consecutive years constitutes a complete circle. I completed my circle in 1999.

There is a book by Steven Charleston called "The Four Vision Quests of Jesus." I have yet to read it, but Beth is engrossed in it. Steven Charleston is a Native American and a Lutheran minister who has spent many years and much studying about Jesus and his life. His book focuses on four specific experiences of Jesus as portrayed in the synoptic gospels.

The First Reading from Acts of the Apostles presents the core of Jesus' followers in the days immediately following his Ascension into heaven. They gather together not understanding Jesus words about what will happen next. They are confused about their mission and sad knowing that Jesus will no longer be with them. But Jesus knows their restlessness and confusion and he tells them to go to the place where they had been staying, the Upper Room as we call it, and to pray. He sends them there to open themselves to the miracle that they will experience, and to prepare themselves for the next leg of their journey. He knows that they are not quite ready to jump into their new life; they need spiritual strength and insight. They need quiet time to reflect and to be open to God's call. So they retreat as instructed, to be away from the world swirling around them, to empty themselves so as to hear God's voice. They have to surrender enough of themselves to allow room for the Spirit to come to fill them.

This was the Vision Quest of his followers – looking for the "vision" or, what is more commonly spoken of in our Christian vernacular as discernment.

For the past two months or so, we have been on a Vision Quest of sorts. We were forced to retreat from our normal and hectic world because of the COVID-19 virus. While many saw the sequester as a burden, and for millions we should not minimize the financial hardship that this imposed on so many families, we can see it as a spiritual time of quiet. Forced to surrender our lifestyles, our routines and even our religious practices of gathering together at liturgies in whatever traditions we hold sacred, we found ourselves a little lost and confused.

Somewhat like Jesus' closest followers, and like those who voluntarily go into the woods for four days of fasting and prayer seeking God, we have retreated into our own homes and have had to learn new routines. I think that many, if not most are experiencing this time as a burden not only financially, but also socially, emotionally and spiritually. But I also believe that it could and really should be a time of surrendering and emptying ourselves to allow God to speak to us. This is our Vision Quest where we are quiet and wait, actively seeking discernment, and shedding our former selves so that the Spirit has room to fill us, to strengthen us for the next phase of our spiritual mission, to give us new insights and directions.

And while many long for the return to the "normal life" that we knew and had before, I more than suggest that that is a mistake. That normal is gone forever! A much better focus would be to look forward to the gifts and challenges that God has in store for us rather than pining for the past. Because, just as it was for the disciples and apostles, it will be how we serve in the mission in front of us that will change the world. May we have the humility to be open to God's new design for us and the courage to cooperate with the Spirit as we take the next steps on our spiritual paths.