

The Feast of Sts Peter and Paul, Apostles (transferred from June 29)
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
July 3, 2022
Ezekiel 34:11-16
Psalm 87
2 Timothy 4:1-8
John 21:15-19

Reconciled in the End

Today we commemorate St Peter and St Paul, Apostles. Their feast day falls each year on June 29.

Because St Paul is our patron, we have transferred the celebration of the feast day he shares with St Peter to this Sunday, the nearest one following June 29. The Book of Common Prayer allows us this option so that we may celebrate our patronal feast, our feast of title on a Sunday.

You may be wondering why St Peter and St Paul share a feast day.

All the other apostles have their own feast days, even the ones we know very little about such as Bartholomew.

The famous Confession of St Peter—"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"—has a day of commemoration of its own on January 18 as does the Conversion of St Paul—the blinding light and the voice from heaven on the road to Damascus—on January 25. But the feast day of Peter and Paul as apostles is on the same day.

We commemorate the lives saints and exemplars on our calendar of commemorations on the days of their deaths, which we understand as the days they entered the nearer presence of God.

The reason Saints Peter and Paul share a feast day is that tradition holds they both died on the date of June 29 some four years apart, around the years 64 to 68 of the common era. They are an apostolic odd couple, to say the least.

They were both apparently fairly old when they died though we don't know their exact ages. We do know that both of them are martyrs. And the fact that they were martyred because of their allegiance to their faith in Jesus the Christ is why today's liturgical color is red in the midst of ordinary time, our longest green season.

They were both executed by the Roman government because they were part of an upstart and illegal religious movement. Any threat to the stability and order of the Roman Empire was eliminated.

In those days of the first century this movement was not called Christianity. Fairly often it was called by those who were part of it simply The Way.

It was—it is—the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love, capital “L,” the Way that Jesus lived and taught and which he invited all to follow.

Peter and Paul gave their lives in response to this Love. They came from very different backgrounds, and they took different approaches with respect to how that Love should be lived out and adapted to different cultural contexts.

Jesus changed both their names. Simon became Peter, and Saul, after that encounter on the way to Damascus, became Paul. And walking with Jesus changed both their minds more than once and led them both to reconsider their own personal and cultural biases and prejudices.

They didn’t always agree with one another, but they were of one heart and mind when it came to the importance of living changed and changing, ever-evolving lives in response to this Love.

In a sermon in the year 395, St. Augustine of Hippo said of Saints Peter and Paul:

“Both apostles share the same feast day, for these two were one; and even though they suffered on different days, they were as one. Peter went first, and Paul followed. And so we celebrate this day made holy for us by the apostles’ blood. Let us embrace what they believed, their life, their labors, their sufferings, their preaching, and their confession of faith.”

It’s probably not an accident that the Episcopal congregation that meets four blocks further south from here is called St Peter’s. It’s younger than St Paul’s by 43 years, founded 1875.

St Peter’s was founded by people who left St Paul’s. The reasons those folks left are part of a long and complex history. A complex racial history figures into it in no small way.

As we continue to discern our work of restoration and reconciliation in this moment in this season in the life of St Paul's, Key West the historic and contemporary relationship between St Peter's, Key West and St Paul's is part of our considerations.

For many years, and I'm told, until quite recently, there were some activities that St Paul's and St Peter's enjoyed each year together. Perhaps part of what is called for is a return to some of those shared happenings.

Since the patronal saints of our two congregations share a feast day, perhaps in years to come we could celebrate that day together. Maybe we'd travel from St Peter's to St Paul's and back again. Or we'd meet in the middle. We'll find an excuse to have a parade or a procession, and we'll make sure there's plenty of incense and all those things that we so enjoy as our distinctive parade personality.

Peter is the patron of netmakers, shipbuilders, and fishermen, and locksmiths.

Paul is the patron of missionaries, evangelists, writers, journalists, authors, public workers (meaning all civil servants), rope and saddle makers, and tent makers.

Between the two of them, they are the patrons for a significant portion of the people who live and work in Key West and the Lower Keys. Perhaps we and St Peter's together could celebrate those folks and the contributions they and their work make to our life together in this community.

What events we may enjoy together in the years ahead is something we should decide together as the congregations of St Peter's and St Paul's.

Like our respective patrons Peter and Paul, our congregations have not always agreed on the best approaches to take or the indicated ways best to adapt our Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement to cultural contexts and realities here.

But, on the whole and in the main, like our patrons Peter and Paul, both in the past and in the present, we are of one heart and mind when it comes to the importance of living changed and changing, ever-evolving lives in response to this Love made manifest in Christ Jesus.

And, in our particular moment in the twenty-first century, both St Peter's and St Paul's, Key West are facing a number of challenges regarding the preservation and restoration of the historic and important and iconic buildings which we hold in trust for the Diocese of Southeast Florida and which we hold as common assets, part of the legacy and heritage, of the entire community. None of these buildings is anybody's clubhouse. They are all held in trust for the benefit, enjoyment, and blessing of all.

In addition to events we might host together and current challenges we share, it behooves us to get to know one another as members of these two southernmost Episcopal outposts of the contiguous United States. We have a lot of listening to do. And, quite likely, we will be listening to and sitting with some uncomfortable historical facts and the way certain realities were experienced by the people of St Peter's and their forebears.

And in the meantime, including this very moment, beyond possible events and getting to know folks at St Peter's, the work that calls to us as ours to do is the same work taken up with their full measure of devotion by both St Peter and St Paul.

Peter, as today's gospel tells us, chastened by his very human and very real betrayal of Jesus on the night before the crucifixion is given three clear chances to declare his love for the resurrected Christ, the same number of chances as the number of his betrayals of Jesus in his hour of greatest testing and suffering.

Paul, as the reading from the second letter to Timothy tells us, at the very end of his life, in spite of everything, still admonishes Timothy and those who remain to "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching." Keep doing the work, he says, not because it is easy but because it is what great Love requires.

So, take heart, dear ones. If any of us, if all of us have veered off course at any time and perhaps found ourselves denying the reality, the centrality of that Love which made us and which calls us, if we have denied that we have that connection with the Holy One, there is still room for us and welcome for us, just as there was for Peter. We just need to come home.

And if we have used our privilege or personal connections to try to get out of some unpleasant consequences as Paul sometimes did, there is still room

for us and welcome for us as there was for Paul. There is accountability, as there should be, and there is also grace.

Walking the Way of Love inaugurated by Jesus and lived out until the end of their earthly days by Peter and Paul may not lead us to change our names as both of them did, but it will call upon us as individuals to change our minds and deal with our own prejudices and biases as they both did.

And so, we will keep doing the work, as Paul our patron says, not because it is easy but because it is what great Love requires. God help us live those lives.