

St. Michael's Church
4th Sunday of Easter
3 May 2020
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Dr. Heidegger's Experiment

In the 1400's, the Spanish explorer--Ponce de Leon--landed on the Atlantic shores of Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. His travels took him to what is now known as St. Augustine. Unfortunately for de Leon, the legend was just that...a legend. In 1800's—and sparked by a curiosity in science and human behavior, Nathaniel Hawthorne introduced us to a curiously pathological Doctor in his short story, *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*.

Dr. Heidegger is in possession of the legendary water, and we are given a bird's eye view of the following scene. Dr. Heidegger invites four of his life-long friends to his home for a scientific experiment: Col. Killigrew, Mr. Medbourne, Mr. Gascoigne, and Widow Wycherly. Each are in the remaining years of life, and each has squandered a precious gift that is unique to only them. Killigrew and his youth, Medbourne and his money, Gascoigne and his political power, and Wycherly and her beauty.

The four guests are seated on one side of a beautiful antique table, and Dr. Heidegger is on the other. In the middle of the table is a crystal decanter filled with water, and in front of each guest is a crystal champagne glass. Dr. Heidegger explains that he has found the elixir of life, the Fountain of Youth. Legend claims that the waters have the ability to return each guest back to the prime of their youth. He assures them that their youthful appearance will return, with the added benefit of having the wisdom and knowledge of a lifetime.

Since each guest has in some way squandered a unique gift over the course of a lifetime, Dr. Heidegger wants to know if once consuming the elixir of life, will each guest use the opportunity to change for the good, or return to old and destructive habits. After consuming two glasses each, their youthfulness returns, as do their old habits that led to their original demise. Dr. Heidegger's experiment proved his hypothesis, that if given the chance to return to our youth—with the wisdom of a lifetime—we would revert back to our old habits.

The unique quality about invitations is that we can choose to accept or decline. Are you in a place with your life that you accept Dr. Heidegger's despairing invitation and hypothesis, or do you accept the light-filled invitation that is offered by John the Baptist in today's Gospel?

We will call this John the Baptist's Experiment. His home is the wilderness, the table is the Jordan River, and the invitations have been sent. The Fountain of Youth becomes the Water of Baptism, living water that lasts forever and is not temporary or fleeting. The Gospel of Mark tells us that all of Judea went out to him, including tax collectors, Pharisees, prostitutes, and most important...Jesus.

John's experiment has already been proven as true and accurate, that the words of the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah are fulfilled. John is the messenger who is preparing the way, and Jesus is Savior and fulfillment of that message. And the Baptism of Jesus begins a journey that invites you and me to step into the Way that has already been prepared for us.

For some it might be the first time that you have heard the invitation of Jesus in a personal way. The reason for you being here today is unique to you, and Jesus is excited that you are here with Him! In the wake of Shelter-in-Place, maybe everything that you counted on disappeared or collapsed, and Jesus is the only place, and the last place, for you to turn. Hallelujah! Each of us encounters Jesus in ways that are individually wrapped, like the most special of gifts, and just for us. On the other hand, you might find that your faith is being renewed, and though you feel like you have been walking through the valley of the shadow of death, your life and faith experiences have taught you that Jesus always leads you to lie down in green pastures beside still waters (Psalm 23).

We all sit at the same table—the new and the renewed--and instead of Dr. Heidegger at the head, it is Jesus. The waters of Baptism and the confession of sins and the proclaiming Jesus as our Lord and Savior are the invitation that we have accepted with a Yes. And at this table we discover two potential realities. The first is that during these last two months we have seen beautiful flowers blossom in our lives. We discover that we are spending more time with Jesus in prayer and the reading of Scripture. We are re-connecting with old friends and writing letters to people for whom we are thankful. We are eating meals together as a family, playing family games—Monopoly, Risk, Scrabble, Rummikub, Uno, War, Battleship—from year's past. We are re-watching movies that are favorites—The Count of Monte Cristo, The Emperor's New Groove, Flubber--and we are spending time with life at a slower pace.

Like any garden with beautiful flowers, weeds have a way of finding a path right next to what is blooming. Even in the Garden of Eden, Satan the Weed found a way to entice and convince. We wake up tomorrow morning and discover that we can't button our pants anymore. We ask our spouse if she dried our favorite pants that are now too small, only to find out that this fabric doesn't shrink. Maybe one too many trips to the fridge and food pantry is the culprit! Or your child in Elementary/Middle School/High School, whom you have reminded the school in the past has many faults, just not the ones they seem to always point out...Only to discover that during this time at home, the same behavior as addressed by the school has somehow found a way into your home! Or as one researcher has pointed out, the astronomical increase in alcohol sales--along with the invitation to view illicit and explicit websites for free—has offered fertile ground for the growth of weeds next to our flowers.

As we intentionally sit at the table with Jesus at the head, in the middle of the table is the water of life, the only true elixir that has so many imitators, so many who present their elixir as flowers but it turns out to be weeds. And when we look around this table and see who has accepted the invitation—Tax Collector, Pharisee, Prostitute, Bully, Alcoholic, Con-Artist, Convict, You, Me, Our Neighbor—we realize that the hypothesis and experiment of John the Baptist have always been true. Everyone is invited and welcomed. And Jesus—the only true elixir for eternal life, is inexhaustible in his forgiveness, his pursuit, and most important his love for each of us.

Question: Can you identify one area in your life--over the past two months--that has experienced an abundance of flowers in your relationship with Jesus? Can you identify one weed? I encourage you to name both, and in prayer given them both to Jesus as the Fountain of Eternal Life.