



Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

Aptos, CA 95003

Sermons 2010 Church Year: Advent 2009 – Pentecost 2010

The Episcopal Church of Saint John the Baptist welcomes all to worship God and to share Christ's love in the world. We are a parish family committed to provide liturgy, Bible study, music, counseling, and Christian education for children, youth, and adults, and to equip all our members for life and for service to others.

More Than We Can Ask or Imagine	9
Old Testament Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4.....	9
New Testament Lesson: Philippians 1:3-11	9
Gospel: Luke 3:1-6.....	10
Sermon.....	10
Our Gift to the Lord.....	12
Sermon.....	12
2 Epiphany.....	14
Readings.....	14
Sermon.....	14
The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me.....	16
Old Testament Lesson: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10	16
Psalm 19 Page 606-607, BCP Caeli enarrant.....	17
New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a	17
Gospel: Luke 4:14-21.....	18
Sermon.....	19
The Vision on the Mountain	22
Sermon.....	22
1 Lent	24
Readings.....	24
Dt. 26:1-11, Rom. 10:8b-13, Lk. 4:1-13	24
Sermon.....	24
The Only Hope Or Else Despair	28
The Only Hope Or Else Despair	28

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18.....	28
Psalm 27:5-14 Page 617, BCP.....	29
New Testament Lesson: Philippians 3:17-4:1	29
Gospel: Luke 13:31-35.....	30
Sermon.....	30
From Beyond Us.....	32
Old Testament Lesson: Joshua 5:9-12	32
Psalm.....	33
New Testament Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21	33
Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32	33
Sermon.....	34
In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being.....	37
Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 43:16-21	37
Psalm 126 Page 782, BCP.....	38
New Testament Lesson: Philippians 3:4b-14	38
Gospel: John 12:1-8	39
Sermon.....	39
Palm Sunday.....	40
Readings.....	40
Sermon.....	40
Easter: With a Love Not My Own.....	43
Old Testament Lesson: Baruch 3:9-15, 3:32-4:4 and Ezekiel 37:1-14	43
Psalm 126 Page 782, BCP.....	44
New Testament Lesson: Romans 6:3-11.....	45
Gospel: Luke 24:1-12	45

Sermon.....	45
Bright Sunday.....	48
Sermon.....	48
Atonement #1 - Anselm.....	52
Sermon:.....	52
Atonement #2 – Peter Abelard.....	54
Revelation: 7:9-17.....	55
Sermon:.....	56
Atonement #3- The Pattern Theory.....	59
Sermon:.....	59
We’re Already Free!.....	62
Psalm 97 Page 726, BCP.....	62
New Testament Lesson: Acts 16:16-34 and Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21.....	62
Gospel: John 17:20-26 and John 12:1-8.....	63
Sermon.....	64
Trinity Sunday.....	67
Readings.....	67
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15.....	67
Sermon.....	67
Second Sunday After Pentecost.....	70
Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24).....	70
Psalm 146 Page 803, BCP.....	71
New Testament Lesson: Galatians 1:11-24.....	71
Gospel: Luke 7:11-17.....	72
Sermon.....	72

We Are the Ones.....	74
Sermon.....	74
One Year at Canterbury Site	75
Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 65:1-9	76
Psalm 22:18-27 Page 611, BCP.....	77
New Testament Lesson: Galatians 3:23-29.....	77
Gospel: Luke 8:26-39	77
Sermon.....	78
Flesh vs. Spirit	80
Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 66:10-14	80
Psalm 66:1-8.....	80
New Testament Lesson: Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16.....	80
Gospel: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20	81
Sermon.....	81
How Can a Samaritan Be Good?	84
Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:9-14	84
Psalm 25:1-10 Page 614, BCP.....	84
New Testament Lesson: Colossians 1:1-14.....	85
Gospel: Luke 10:25-37	85
Sermon.....	86
Proper 11 Year C	88
Readings.....	88
Gen. 18:1-10a, Col 1:15-28, Lk 10:38-42.....	88
Sermon.....	88
Meditation on Relationships.....	90

Readings.....	91
Gen. 18:20-33, Col. 2:6-15, Lk. 11:1-13.....	91
Sermon.....	91
All Is Vanity, Unless...	95
Old Testament Lesson: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23	95
Psalm 49:1-11 Page 652, BCP.....	95
New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-11	96
Gospel: Luke 12:13-21	97
Sermon.....	97
Spectacles of Grace	99
Sermon.....	99
I Come to Bring Division	101
Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 23:23-29.....	101
Psalm 82 Page 705, BCP	102
New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-11	102
Gospel: Luke 12:49-56	102
Sermon.....	103
Pentecost 13, Year C	106
Readings.....	106
Dt. 30:15-20, Phil. 1-20, Lk. 14:25-33.....	106
Sermon.....	106
A Cantaloupe Remembered	109
Sermon.....	109
But Are Not Grieved Over the Ruin Of Joseph	112
Old Testament Lesson: Amos 6:1a,4-7	112

Psalm 146 Page 803, BCP	112
New Testament Lesson: 1 Timothy 6:6-19	113
Gospel: Luke 16:19-31	114
Sermon.....	114
Use the Faith You Have!	117
Old Testament Lesson: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4	117
Psalm 37:1-10 Page 633,BCP	118
New Testament Lesson: 2 Timothy 1:1-14	118
Gospel: Luke 17:5-10	119
Sermon.....	119
Dignity and Faith and Civility	121
Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 32:22-3	121
Psalm 121, Page 779, BCP.....	122
New Testament Lesson: Timothy 3:14-4:5	122
Gospel: Luke 18:1-8	123
Sermon.....	123
Don't Duck "Zacchaeus Moments"	126
Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 1:10-18	126
Psalm 32:1-8 Page 624, BCP.....	127
Gospel: Luke 19:1-10	127
Sermon.....	128
The Saints in Our Balcony	130
Sermon.....	130
Proper 29C	133
Sermon.....	133

About Our Preachers.....	136
Rev. Steve Ellis, Rector of The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist	136
Rev. John Duncan, Assisting Priest.....	136
Rev. Eliza Linley, Assisting Priest.....	137
Rev. Stu Schlegel, Assisting Priest.....	137
Cross-Reference of Sermons and Preachers.....	138

More Than We Can Ask or Imagine

Date: December 6, 2009

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

New Testament Lesson: Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Sermon

Ephesians, chapter 3 says, "Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. . . "

Today's lessons remind me of that delight in God, that trusting sentence. Advent gives us angels, messengers with promises. Today it gives us prophets like Isaiah and Zechariah. They bring us a message that may be hard for us to imagine.

Hard to imagine if we think God is exacting. Hard to imagine if we feel that God is interested in our faults. So many people think of God as disapproving and harsh. What Isaiah and Zechariah suggest to us is God's yearning for us to be free.

God was always in the freedom business. First, I suppose in creation. Then in letting the world know through Abraham that God wanted light for all nations. Then in freedom from slavery in Egypt, freedom for a new life with commandments that set them apart and made them much admired for their justice, their mercy, their self-sufficiency and inter-dependence. In the prophets that gave them intimations of things God would do as they were ready. And these developments always talked of a day when much more would come to human beings. The law written on their hearts, a new heart and a new spirit. A time of justice, a healing of the world. Many of those promises were about a different kind of freedom, a

healing of the world that started with healing the human heart from within. Justice that came about not by violence and control, but by transformation of the human spirit.

No one much understood these promises. They saw the demands of the law, and it seemed hard to keep. The justice of God sounded fearsome to them. Isaiah knew that bringing the people back from exile was close to God's heart – gave us an image of God as a Shepherd tending his flock, bringing them home, carry the lambs to weak to walk in his own arms, taking them personally through the dangerous desert until they were home and safe.

Zechariah gives us God as remembering promises, standing by promises, still wanting for the people every blessing, sustaining them when enemies stand against them, God who keeps faith with an oath sworn in times almost forgotten.

John the Baptist says the time for these things to happen is again coming on the people. The Divine is about to move again, and in a new way. God's Chosen leader is coming to the people and they should be ready. God longs to restore the people's dignity, their prosperity, their shalom.

But Isaiah and Zechariah and John join a long history of people who could not imagine what God was up to in Jesus. It was not freeing Israel from Rome, except in the sense that Israel didn't have to be obsessed with hatred of Rome. It was being freed inwardly; being freed by the love that came to them from the center of the universe that came to them through Jesus that flowed to all humankind. But no one could ask for it, no one could imagine it.

This kind of freedom had never been seen in the world. It is no wonder that no one could imagine it. You have to experience it to imagine it. Until you are loved unconditionally, you can't know the freedom that comes to you when you aren't trying to avoid criticism, when you are trying to justify yourself, when you are trying to get "even" which shows that you feel you are less than the person who hurt you, that they are ahead or above.

It is tragic when we are governed by the need to justify ourselves. It is also perfectly normal. It is the way we start, and the state we revert to when we forget that we are loved, absolutely, completely, without conditions, by God, no less than God. When you sit for a time each day basking in the love of God, when you take yourself just as you are without any pretense, and offer yourself, resentments and joys and faults and dreams, just as you are, and God loves you, a transformation occurs. What other people think doesn't matter so much. Their slights, their praise become just another fact of living, because you no longer need to be justified.

The freedom begins a transformation. This kind of freedom amounts to a new heart and new spirit, and it is the gift that humankind received in Jesus, in his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection and ascension. But that is getting ahead of our story.

In Advent our story is this: God was doing a new thing. No one could think it, so no one could imagine it, so no one could ask for it. And Michael Card has a song that conveys the mystery. [The Promise]

Our Gift to the Lord

Date: December 20, 2009

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

Today, the month-long season of Advent comes to its fourth and last Sunday. Thursday night will be Christmas Eve. So I suppose that most of us have by now done our Christmas shopping and have gotten the presents we will be giving on this greatest of gift-giving holidays.

Every year, as I go about thinking over and selecting gifts, I am drawn to the words which used to be said by the celebrant on behalf of us all in every Eucharist: “and here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies. . . “You know, the only real gift we can give anyone – of which Christmas gifts are a sort of annual symbol – is the gift of ourselves. And that is the only real gift we can give to the Lord.

And yet, most of us, I suspect, don’t give much thought to this during the year. Don’t give much thought to our giving of ourselves to Christ. We think of missionaries, or nuns or the like; they give themselves to Christ. But we go to church, we make a pledge, we perhaps give thanks over our food. Are those giving ourselves, our souls and bodies, to the Lord?

There are many sides to this question. Would a gift of me be worthy? Would it amount to much? What sort of gift would it be? What does the whole idea even mean? Well, of course, we aren’t “worthy.” But it is a bedrock principle in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures that anything that is freely offered, however small or commonplace, can be used by God for extraordinary purposes. In God’s hand, even small things are multiplied and become great.

Jesus embodies this principle in his feeding of the multitudes. You all know the story. At the close of a long, weary day, crowds of people were still following Jesus, hanging on his every word. There was nothing to feed them with except a pitiful five barley loaves and two small fishes. But a young boy stepped forward and freely offered them to Jesus. People must have scoffed at the size of the offering. What was that to feed thousands of people? But Jesus took that and blessed it, and it proved enough for everyone to eat his or her fill, and there were twelve basketfuls of scraps left over.

You know, biblical scholars debate about that story. Some say it was a miracle, a divine intervention in the ways of earthly reality. Others say it was a miracle, but a more natural one: that, impressed by the boy’s sharing, the rest of the crowd reached into their pockets and shared what they had. Either way, the point of the story to the evangelists who told it is clear: in Christ’s hands the little that is offered freely becomes much, becomes enough.

There's another familiar story in scripture that speaks to this, particularly at Advent time. An angel appeared to an unknown village maiden and gave her the startling news that she had been chosen by God to give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. It must have been a frightening call, because it would clearly mean shame and humiliation. She was betrothed to Joseph, but not yet married to him, and how would her family and the community react to her becoming pregnant too soon? How would Joseph possibly understand? And yet, she responded, "Yes." "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy Word." Mary wasn't called to give her lunch, but her body and her reputation. And because she made that gift, God's purpose was carried out through her. And we remember Mary as the epitome of all that is finest and noblest in human beings.

Let me add a third little story to this collage. In the book of Acts, a man named Ananias makes a brief appearance. In a vision, God appeared to him and told him to go to a certain house, where he would find Saul. Saul, who had been blinded in his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, needed care. This was a frightening request too. Ananias had heard about this Saul and knew he was a fiery and ruthless persecutor of the Christians. It must have felt like an Austrian Jew being asked to go to minister to Hitler! But the Bible tells it very simply: "So Ananias went." And he became the instrument through whom Saul was brought into the love and fellowship of the Christian community. And Saul, the ruthless persecutor of the Christians, became Paul the tireless ambassador for Christ.

I think what it means to "offer ourselves, our souls and bodies" is to open ourselves in love and trust to those around us, and thus to allow ourselves to be used by the Lord in his scheme of things. To give over our possessions when they are needed. To risk our reputation, when that is needed. To risk being afraid, if that is called for. I doubt that God will use many of us in such a dramatic way as God used that unnamed lad with the bread and fishes, Mary in her young trust, or Ananias in his faithful obedience. But our gifts will be no less significant or real. It is the willingness to give of ourselves that makes Christmas presents what they are, and it is what makes Christianity as well.

Advent is almost over. The struggle with guest lists, with greeting cards, with holiday baking – all of the things that come with this time of too much to do and too little time to do it. But we find time to do these things, because those gifts, those cards, and those cookies are truly important. In a few days, Christmas will dawn again, and around the altar at church, around the tree at home, and around the table at dinner, we will experience and give expression to the beauty, the mystery, and the awe of God's coming to us – God's unique and stirring gift of God's self born in the Christ child, born into our lives and hearts.

Where is the Lord on our gift list? What do we have to give him? What can we offer this King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who will soon be lying in a humble manger? Just "ourselves, our souls and bodies." We can give him our little, humble, daily "yeses" to his little, usually unglamorous, daily calls. An act of kindness. A moment of forgiveness. A little reaching out. A loving thought, warmly expressed. A caring and healing touch.

It is from these little, daily, seemingly insignificant gifts of ourselves, that God builds the Kingdom.

Amen.

2 Epiphany

Date: January 17, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Is. 62:1-5, Ps 96:1-10, 1 Cor. 12:1-11, Jn. 2:1-11

Sermon

Not long ago we attended a wedding in San Francisco at the Great American Music Hall. It was a large wedding, with hot and cold running bridesmaids and groomsmen, a big Chinese Baptist family and a not-so-big Jewish family. The bride and groom chose the venue because they're both fans of the contemporary music scene, and this was very much in evidence at the reception. So although we got out while the evening was yet young, we nonetheless thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle, the vibes, the cultural collision of disparate families and traditions marinated in rock and roll. Those of us who have seen a lot of weddings know that, no matter how different one may appear to be from another, basically every wedding is the same. You're there for the same purpose, to witness the vows two people make to one another. At the same time, you know that, for the principals, as for their families and friends, this wedding is an entirely new thing under the sun. It is a transformation of two people into a new entity that will itself bring new things, and perhaps new people, into the world.

So this morning, in this new year, we have a gospel text about the new ministry of Jesus and his new self-understanding. It's a story about that developing ministry set in the context of the new life of a bridal couple, and it centers around the miracle of new wine from water, which is neither new nor old, but eternal. If we look more closely at this story, though, it's a little strange. Jesus is at first reluctant to become the sommelier at this village feast. However, having just been to a wedding where the Jewish mother of the groom was an old friend of mine, I can understand that when Mary says, in effect, "listen to your mother!" - it carries some weight. But what, really, is the point of this miracle? Is it so the bridal couple will not lose face in the community by having run out of wine? It's hard for me to grasp the role of Jesus as Martha Stewart. Was it to get everyone roaring drunk? Six of those big jars of water would have been about 150 gallons. By the caterer's rule of thumb, that's enough wine for about 1800 people. If there's such a thing as too much wine, this would be it. So what's the point?

As I look around at this congregation, at our community, and at the world around us, I see tough times. I see health crises, job losses, threats of foreclosure. I see world events that are no more positive. The terrible tragedy in Haiti has opened Americans' hearts and pocketbooks, and that's a good thing. But will there be a corresponding drop in donations here at home? Nonprofits, the organizations that work for good, from seminaries to food banks, are stressed beyond capacity and looking toward the future with trepidation. To put it briefly, this is "hunker-down" time. And a story about turning water into massive quantities of wine looks kind of silly. We're just trying to get through it here, and most of us are better off than many.

But then I remember that this is the gospel of John, where everything is symbol and metaphor. It's not really a story about wine, or even about Jesus as miracle worker. After all, this is not a healing, a making-whole, a remittance of suffering. It's a story of divine abundance, and it's hedged about with information about who Jesus is. When Mary tells him to do something about the embarrassing shortage of wine, he says, "My hour is not yet come." What hour? The hour for Jesus to perform miracles? No. For this evangelist, everything Jesus does points to and through the passion and the cross. That's the hour he's talking about. So this crazy gesture of way too much wine is about the Messiah, and the scandal of the cross, and the access to abundant transformation that even we, so many years later, inherit. When the text tells us that the water was there for the Jewish rites of purification, this author wants us to remember that the cross makes other purification redundant. That water is no longer needed. And when we are told that this miracle reveals Christ's glory, we are to look forward to the Resurrection. We are to look forward, in other words, to whatever it is that reveals Christ's eternal glory in our own lives. Now this transformation of water into wine is no longer a party trick. It makes more sense at a moment when we are trying to get through the bad time. "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." This is hope. This is new life. This is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ, which body we are. None of us is alone. In communion we become, our souls and bodies, that 150 gallons of new wine.

You know, when we designed this building, we said, "Won't it be nice to only have two services on a Sunday morning, like most Episcopal churches?" But that was a pipe dream. It seems we can't do that, because we have too many people. We don't really fit into two services. Oh, dear. What shall we do with all this new wine? How will this delight of God be manifest in the world? This weekend our new vestry is on retreat to think and pray about this very question.

That's the question for the church as a whole, but the same question is raised for each of us. What's the new wine in your life? What is the new thing that God is doing? I believe that these new things, these transformations, happen in spite of, and sometimes because of the reverses, the challenges, and the plain bad luck we run into. Our work is to discern where fermentation is happening, where new wine is being created. Paul writes to the church at Corinth about different kinds of gifts, and service, and activities, and reminds them that the point of all of these is the common good. I think that sometimes we discount the gifts that God has given us. We underestimate our abilities, or we think that a certain gift is not easily translated into the service of the Body of Christ and the world. But to do that is not just selling ourselves short; it's selling God short. Why were we given these gifts? Why were we given the ability to make art, or to make somebody laugh, or feel wanted or loved, the ability to lead a meeting or learn how to create a lesson plan? Some gifts are stranger than these: an illness can teach us patience and how to rely on God's grace, and that's a gift, too, one that can also serve the common good.

A few weeks ago Steve preached on why a regular practice of prayer is a useful thing. Something to bring to that conversation is an inventory of the assets God has given you. How is God calling you to use those gifts now for the good of the world? And if you feel that your gifts are not so many, or so useful, try posting this text from Isaiah where you pray to remind you of God's love:

“You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called, “My delight is in you”.

God has created each of us for delight, to serve the common good. Some of the greatest spiritual gifts I have received have been given to me by people who were hopeful, accepting and wise in the face of adversity. The sharing of those gifts is how new wine is created in community. In difficult times, it often seems as though there’s not enough - of money, of people to get the job done, of resources. But the transformation of the lives of men and women is not expensive. In the economy of God, it costs everything, and yet it’s free. Putting on the garment of light in Epiphany means moving into that understanding of limitless possibility in a finite world.

This is good news. It is good news that we do not live for ourselves alone, and that what we have is not for us. We are not created to live closed in upon ourselves; protective, possessive, and defensive. We are not at our best when we try to live that way; we impoverish ourselves when we try to live that way. And we don’t have to! When we dare to live beyond ourselves; for others and for the larger whole, then something wonderful can be created; there is simply more to go around. When Jesus turned water into wine, he put aside his own agenda and understanding of what he was supposed to be doing in favor of what was needed and what he found he was able to do. God help us to be co-creators of the transformation that will neither make us drunk nor hung over, but thankful.

The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me

Date: January 24, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All the people of Israel gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he

opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Psalm 19 Page 606-607, BCP Caeli enarrant

7 The law of the LORD is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
8 The statutes of the LORD are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
9 The fear of the LORD is clean
and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
11 By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
12 Who can tell how often he offends? *
cleanse me from my secret faults.
13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.
14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Gospel: Luke 4:14-21

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Sermon

Hebrews says:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without estrangement from God or others. Take it seriously. Jesus had doubts, just like you and me, and he had to make decisions just as we do. I wonder what it was like for him to think about the story of the parting of the Exodus - God bringing his Hebrew nation out of Egypt where they were exploited as slaves – and the parting of the Red Sea. That story was 1400 years old when Jesus first heard it, and I wonder if he believed that the Red Sea was parted and the people walked through on dry ground? I wonder if he saw his need for prayer as wishful thinking. I wonder if he ever thought his healings were just people getting excited and feeling better because of that excitement. He was tempted in every way as we are.

But let's not forget the other half of that sentence. He was without estrangement. He didn't let go of God when he got afraid, or confused, or had doubts. He kept on choosing to trust. He kept on choosing to honor the story his people told. He kept on clinging to the one he found in his prayers, the one he called Father. And when power stirred in him, he may have been frightened by it, worried about how people would take offense at him when they saw it. But he didn't hide it, he chose to inherit the gifts he was given, and to claim the Spirit that was put upon him for the good of others.

He shared our temptations, but he clung to the Father, and so he was obedient to the gifts that were given, and connected to the people for whom they were given to him. And that is why, soon after his baptism, he was in the synagogue in his own hometown. He took the part of a lector that day as was the right of every grown man in good standing. He read the lesson, and it was his right to begin the discussion of it after the reading, so he did.

The lesson was a wonderful compilation of texts from Isaiah, texts about the "day of the Lord" the time when God's reign would be experienced by the faithful who had long been waiting. The text read, as Luke puts it for us,

[sing it Strathdee's style, but with the last line, "To put it out for all to hear that God's wiped the slate clean!]

Now you remember that Jesus had been struggling with making his ministry public. He was teaching his disciples, and trying to keep a lid on public notice. As he put it to his mother in last week's gospel, "it is not yet my time." But Jesus read that text to the synagogue in his own home, and he was touched by it, and he took the plunge. The day of the Lord had come, his ministry was the instrument by which people

could choose to enter the promise. He said those fateful words, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus had decided that believing the stories of his people, trusting what he discovered in prayer, and living out his gifts was the way of life that he would choose, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death stopped him. I doubt he knew at this point that death wouldn't be able to stop him. He just knew that if he didn't own what God had given him he would lose his ability to live with God in the present moment, his ability to live so lovingly with others, and he was too clear and too stubborn to let it go for lesser comforts.

So he said it. He threw in his life with the stories of his people, the life-giving stories, and with the experience, so hard to name, of being with God here and now.

Now and then an Episcopalian does the same. Someone who's been saying they don't know about the Creed, they aren't sure about the Church and its history, that they don't have enough faith, enough courage – you know the litany – comes to the realization that what the Creed and the worship of the Church and its community has brought them to – the presence and practice of walking with God here and now – is so precious that they are ready to take the plunge. Think of the power, the joy that come to you when you do this, and imagine doing it most of the time!

Some of you have been studying the Scriptures in advance, and have thought about this passage, and have said that it is about us. Well, it is. Luke didn't record this so that we could be glad this was Jesus' mission statement. He said this because to follow Jesus is to choose this as the reality in which we live. To follow Jesus is to claim the gifts we are given. To own the fact that the Spirit of the Lord is given to us. To own that the Spirit and the gifts are given us for the purpose of healing the people and the structures of the world around us, and to let everyone know that the time has come when God wipes the slate clean!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

Because God has anointed me

To preach good news to the poor

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive

And recovering of sight to the blind

To set at liberty those who are oppressed

To put it out for all to hear that

God's wiped the slate clean!

Sing it back to me

Sing it with Jesus

Sing it together- "us."

The Vision on the Mountain

Date: February 14, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

One of the most familiar themes of Christian teaching – at least for us in a sacramental Church – is that we are called to see Christ as present in our daily lives. Most of us can sense his presence in the Eucharist, where we feel it as somehow there in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. We are told by the gospel that Christ is also to be found in our neighbors, in our friends, deep within our own hearts, and, perhaps above all, in the stranger in need. And yet, even though it sometime touches us, we all know how elusive that sense of his presence can be. Theologians speak of the *deus incognito*, the hidden God, and I know that you and I know only too well how difficult it is to penetrate that incognito and see Christ in the world around us, in the world of everyday, in the world of our daily and normal life. Sometimes it happens, almost in spite of ourselves, in a moment of unexpected beauty or pain, in some sudden turning in our life, or in some moment of deep compassion. We are surprised and dazzled as we catch a glimpse of Christ's true presence and glory, right there in our lives, in our world. But, for most of us, this is occasional and fleeting. The mundane world is usually just that for us: mundane, earthy, all too this-worldly.

This, I think, is where we find the meaning of that haunting story of the Transfiguration, which we heard in our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus and three of his closest disciples, Peter, John, and James, had gone up on a mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying, his three companions slept. When they awoke, they suddenly saw him not as their earthly teacher and master, but as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, his robes white and glistening, his face transfigured with glory, just as Moses' face was said to be shining when he was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. Now, Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah, the supreme representatives to Jews of their scriptures, of what we Christians call the Old Testament. Moses represented to them the Law and Elijah the Prophets. Then the disciples heard the voice of God from above saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Peter's well known response was to offer to build dwellings, tabernacles, shrines, for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But this was not appropriate, and soon the vision faded, and our Lord and his three followers went down from the mountain to continue their work of teaching and healing.

This story comes at the climax of our Epiphany season, because that is what it is – a wonderful, climactic epiphany. An "epiphany," as you know, is a showing forth, a manifestation, and this was a manifestation of Jesus as the Christ for Peter, James, and John. These three disciples would go on to become pillars of the faith and stalwart leaders of the new Christian Church following our Lord's resurrection. But at this stage of their life with him, they knew and understood him as an ordinary man. A wonderful man, to be sure, a rabbi and their friend and master, but very much just another human being. Only with the Easter vision, the resurrection, would they slowly and fitfully come to recognize that he was the Christ, the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. The experience of his Transfiguration on the mountain was a gleaming

moment of spiritual insight for them. But they would lose this vision as Jesus' passion came upon them. They, like the others of the Twelve, would deny and abandon their leader. It was only at the resurrection that they would really know that he was the Christ, and that they would set off to tell the world and change it forever. Then, and only then, would they fully understand the Transfiguration epiphany that they had experienced on that holy mountain.

And so it is for most of us. We now and again may catch fleeting glimpses of the glory of God and of the shimmering presence of Christ, but so often he is hidden, the *deus incognito*. It is our task to find him in our lives and to recognize him.

Let me tell you a familiar story, the wonderful story of St. Christopher. It is a myth, of course. A myth is a story which may or may not ever have happened in history but which, like all long-lasting and beloved stories, contains a very real truth for those who can hear it. Long ago and far away – so many good myths start out that way – there was a strikingly big and strong man named Offero, who wanted to serve only the very greatest king in the world. He went far and wide, serving one king after another, but something would always show each one up as not the greatest and strongest. So Offero would move on in his quest. One day, one of the kings he served made the sign of the cross, and Offero asked why. The king said it kept away the power of the devil. So our hero went off to find the devil to serve, for he was clearly an even greater king. He did find the devil, but he soon learned that the devil feared a king named Christ, who had died on a cross. So Offero went on with his quest, now looking for Christ. He couldn't find him, but he did find an old hermit who told him that he might find Christ if he went to a certain river nearby. The river was deep and wide and many drowned trying to cross. Offero was advised to help people make the crossing, using his strength and height to carry people across. This would please Christ, the hermit told him, and perhaps Christ would come and show himself. So Offero built a hut by the river, and when anyone came along who needed help crossing, he would take that person on his shoulders and carry him or her safely across. Once, after some time of this, he heard a small voice calling his name, and he found a child who needed to cross the river. Offero lifted the child to his shoulders and started the crossing. But, as he went along, the weight on his shoulders became heavier and heavier. Finally across, he put the child down, and told him that he had felt terrible danger because the child's weight had grown so great that he had nearly fallen and drowned. He said that he had felt as though he had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Then, the child replied that indeed he had, that he had even carried the Creator of the world. The child said that he was Jesus Christ, the king whom Offero sought to serve. And he said that henceforth his name would not be Offero but Christopher, the Christ-bearer, For when he helped and carried any needy person, he helped and carried Christ himself.

It is a wonderful old story, and I think it helps us understand the Transfiguration story. On that holy mountain Peter, James and John came – like Offero – to see that they served not just Jesus the man but Christ the King. And so, Peter wanted to build a tent, a kind of shrine, so that he could preserve the experience forever. Peter's was a wrong-headed response, because it would be to make an idol of Christ, Just as Christopher had to keep carrying needy people, so Peter had to let Jesus lead him back down off the mountain, back to the world of daily life. There, in our everyday world, is where Jesus is to be worshipped, adored, and served. In the world. That is where we are usually going to find God. Not in

church only, or in liturgies only, but in the many events and people of daily life. There is a beautiful line in the climax of the musical *Les Miserables*, which speaks of this truth. The line is so simple but so profound: "To love another person," it goes, "is to see the face of God."

You see, friends, two things are simply true. One is that none of us gets to live always in the blinding light of an epiphany, always on the mountain-tops of life. The scriptures tell us that we are to flourish like a palm tree, but we must remember that palm trees grow in deserts and not in gardens. We are asked to bear great fruit, but fruit trees grow in valleys and not on mountaintops. Some of us will have our moments of wonderful epiphany, of witnessing some glistening transfiguration, but most of our lives are probably going to be in our everyday deserts and gardens.

The second great truth is that our religion cannot be just in church. A great Christian writer once said, "Religion begins in mysticism and ends in politics." As Robert Frost said of poetry, so too of religion: "it begins with a lump in your throat." It begins there, but it must not end there. To keep our religion in church is to imprison Christ in a tabernacle. It is only by taking him out into the world, into our lives, that Christ can live out there through us. And it is only if he is with us, out there in our daily lives, that we will be wise enough and strong enough to truly love other people. And that is terribly important, because loving other people is how you and I get to behold the transfigured face of God.

Amen.

1 Lent

Date: February 21, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Dt. 26:1-11, Rom. 10:8b-13, Lk. 4:1-13

Sermon

Who are we, beloved sons and daughters of God, and how do we know who we are within that definition? Lent provides us an opportunity to find that identity. Traditionally we think of Lent as a time to deny the self in order to draw closer to God. But who is the Holy Spirit calling to, if not our truest, deepest selves? What if it's not so much about giving up stuff as about giving in? Think of the Holy Spirit of God, just for a minute, as someone very close to you. As a lover, who wants, more than anything, to have some time alone with us. This lover is not giving an ultimatum, but a heartfelt plea. "Honey, you know how much I love you! I just want to spend some time with you, get to know you better...why don't we just go away to the desert together, hmm...? Just the two of us?" What if that's the real message God has for us this Lent? Makes it a little more attractive, doesn't it? Who could say no? This morning's readings are all about that

journey with God through the wilderness, and studying them can be a model for our own Lenten getaway at home with God.

In Deuteronomy the Hebrew people arrive at a place they can finally call home. After years of wandering in the wilderness, God commands them to celebrate their homecoming with an offering of first fruits, and to remember where they came from. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..." They are to remember that God loved them enough to bring them out of slavery and oppression into a land flowing with milk and honey. But the price for this is to remember, and give thanks. To remember who brought them out of misery and who loves them still. Remember, too, that they were strangers and sojourners in Egypt, and that they are not the only people in this new land they have been privileged to inhabit. No, there are aliens who reside among them. There are Canaanites and Hivites and Amorites and Perizzites and Palestinians who were already there when they got there, and they are to celebrate with all the bounty God has given them.

There are Native Americans and Mexicans and Vietnamese and Guatemalans and Chinese and some of them don't have green cards and others are gay and lesbian and some of them are black and brown and all manner of different things, and God commands us to celebrate together with them all and to give thanks at our deliverance from death into life. That's the price of admission. That's what it costs to be in a love affair with God. Bp. Marc Andrus of the diocese of California says, "Our task in the church is not actually to include or exclude anyone. Actions of justice and injustice reverberate through the whole, promoting either integrity, remembering, shalom, or diabolic isolation."

Another way of looking at this text is to take all of these characters and to think of them as parts of ourselves. The Egyptians who oppressed the Hebrew people – who would they be? How can we translate this text into words that resonate in our own souls? Egyptians, after all, are not bad people. Who could they be in this story but our own most repressive proclivities, our hardness of heart, our sinful behavior that holds enslaved that part of us that yearns to be at home with God? What is that promised land, flowing with milk and honey, if not a life of shalom in the Reign of God, a life characterized by justice, mercy, and love of our neighbor, a life at peace with ourselves?

In Romans St. Paul recalls the words of the Deuteronomist, that the word of God is not up in heaven that you have to send someone to bring it down, and it's not across the sea, that you have to send out the fleet to bring it back; no, it's already in your mind and in your heart. If we pay attention to the Holy Spirit, in other words, we have it in us to know what God is saying to us, to the church, and what we should do. Everyone, he says, that calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. You don't have to be a Jew or a Greek. You don't even have to be Episcopalian.

In this season of Lent, however, we are being asked to take time, to make time, to listen, and not to assume we know without giving God a chance to speak to us.

The readings play on the theme of fullness and emptiness. Jesus returns from his baptism full of the Holy Spirit, but he puts himself in a situation where he becomes famished. The temptations the Adversary set before him are all about being filled up with something other than God. Of course, this is the temptation we face all the time.

We are tempted to try to be all things to all people, to feed everyone with the stones of our own self-sufficiency.

We are tempted to idolize power and authority, or to assume them for ourselves and then pat ourselves on the back, because it looks like this might be a way to get something done for a change.

We long to be protected from suffering and harm, to have God save us from the worst of what might happen. Those who love God ARE protected from the worst, but not always in the way we might expect, or wish for. Not all suffering is redemptive, but God, who suffers with us, opens up the possibility of deeper faith and a closer relationship.

Lent is not about trying to be perfect. Maybe that would be something to give up for Lent! As one youth minister has said*, Jesus did not enter the wilderness with a stack of scriptural commentaries, a pack of Nicorette, and an elliptical trainer. He went to find God. The temptations the devil presented him with are fallbacks that many of us are familiar with: the temptation to create food that does not sustain, to rule by power and control, to avoid suffering by any means possible. But instead, Jesus stood firm as a child of God, clothed in his humanity and faith. These are the same clothes we have as we come before God.

This Lent, challenge yourself, not to be more of who you think the world is calling you to be – the unrealistic thinner, fitter, smarter, faster, whatever. What about being more human? After all, this is who God created us to be. What does humanity look like? As humans, we are frail, insignificant, humble, thankful, trusting. It can be hard, but liberating, to see ourselves in this light. Jesus went into the wilderness and found in his weakness the strength and will to be trusting and thankful and honest. Maybe seeing ourselves clearly is as far as we'll get this Lent. But that's enough. Seeing ourselves, we begin to see those around us.

God's love calls to the love that God has already put in us. That's what this season is really about. In the coming weeks, notice how love speaks to you. Who or what shows you God's heart? How do you know that you belong to God? How do you become secure enough in God's love to manifest compassion in the world? Risk prayer. Show up for worship. Let God speak

within you. And know that the Word is very near to you; it is “on your lips and in your heart”, each one of us carrying Christ to one another.

*Jason Sierra, associate for Young Adult and Campus Ministries, Episcopal Church Center, Seattle office

The Only Hope Or Else Despair

Date: February 28, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

Psalm 27:5-14 Page 617, BCP

5 One thing have I asked of the LORD; one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days
of my life;

6 To behold the fair beauty of the LORD *
and to seek him in his temple.

7 For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe
in his shelter; *

he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.

8 Even now he lifts up my head *
above my enemies round about me.

9 Therefore I will offer in his dwelling an oblation
with sounds of great gladness; *

I will sing and make music to the LORD.

10 Hearken to my voice, O LORD, when I call; *
have mercy on me and answer me.

11 You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." *
Your face, LORD, will I seek.

12 Hide not your face from me, *
nor turn away your servant in displeasure.

13 You have been my helper;
cast me not away; *

do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.

14 Though my father and my mother forsake me, *
the LORD will sustain me.

New Testament Lesson: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Sermon

Philippians says:

The Lord Jesus Christ . . . will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.

Earthquakes. Health care debate. Slow recovery of the economy. Gridlock. When the world is full of such, it might seem almost irrelevant to stop and talk about glory? Yet I think we can do today is just that. I had better talk about glory, and even rival theories of glory. It may be a key to understanding how we want to go about being in God's world. It may be a key to getting un-stuck.

Let's start with the big picture. The Christian claim is, the universe is governed by a good God, a Creator, the Trinity, who cares about good and evil, who cares about every living creature, who cares how we treat one another, who created us to join in the love that is already the divine life, between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let's move our focus to a smaller frame, human history, one planet in a vast universe, one tiny sliver of time in a universe that is larger than time. In this human story the Trinity was distressed that our love-bond with Itself was damaged, that we who were made to be subject to freedom and glory in the Divine life had become subject to evil, to estrangement from God. And so God came to share our humanity. God is not high and mighty, but loving, and wanted us restored to the glory for which we were created.

God's glory is the love that is already present in the Trinity, a fierce, sublime respect and delight that is so full and generous that it wants to share itself, and creates us – all creatures – to be, each in their own way – part of that divine economy of delight.

The nature of God's glory is that the deepest nature of reality – reality, the only reality, the universe – is this love. We are invited to participate. Christ was born to restore us to that standing and participation. Yet he found entrenched opposition. People who hadn't experienced the divine glory, the majesty and beauty of the divine love, fought it. This is natural because people fight change, and we fight the loss of any advantage that we think we might have over others.

The nature of the divine love is that it seeks to good of all. The nature of the human tendency to fight is that we can't see past our own advantage, and we don't want to let anyone get ahead of us, catch up to us, we don't want to lose the opportunity to be better than someone morally, wealthier than someone, superior to some group or race, smarter than some group we oppose. And as long as we find our identity there, in opposition, we are opposed to the gospel of Christ.

Our identity must be found in the love of Christ, the love that has forgiven us and given us a new place to stand. Then we can love others without worrying about who is first. There is enough to go around. We see that God loves others as well as ourselves, and when our identity is a baptismal identity, we can love that way, too. And the glory of God infuses our lives, a little at a time, with abundance.

The opposition to Jesus mounts in the stories of Lent. Herod wants to kill him is this week's story, and the leaders of Jerusalem want to fight Rome in Rome's kind of fighting. Jesus is desolate because God wants Jerusalem, of all places, to quit thinking in "us against them" terms. And so he tells them, through his tears, that they've chosen their futile path, and sealed their futile fate, and that the glory of God won't be theirs until some generation when people receive him as the revelation that God's glory is in a love for all, a love that is full of forbearance, a steadfast love, a love that is not unwilling to suffer for the beloved, because glory wasn't in the things that were sacrificed. Glory was in the love that let them go for love's sake.

How often are we in struggles? How often do we feel that being right is at stake? How often are we afraid of losing face? How often is our stubbornness about wanting to prove ourselves smarter than others, or more powerful? How often do we get wounded at a word or a slight, and feel our integrity is questioned or that we've lost someone's good opinion of us, and become combative? Or withdraw from conversation? How different all this is when the glory of God is the experience in which we stand.

In that reality we are fully blessed, and we can afford to love the other, whether the issue is a domestic spat or making public policy. When the glory of God is apparent to us, we aren't struggling for every advantage we can get, legitimate or no. We are able to think of the common good, of what will be best for us and the other. That freedom, that love, that ability to grasp my own rights and advantages lightly, and to use them, spend them for the highest good, is the glory of God.

Now this isn't "being nice." This is a fierce discipline in the face of difficulty. It is a kind of noble living. It doesn't always prevail, but it always makes us all stronger. We see it in great people in difficult times, in Lincoln, in Ghandi, in Mandella and Tutu, all of whom made difficult choices for many years without malice even for their enemies, doggedly seeking the common good.

This is why Paul has to say that some are living as enemies of the Gospel of Christ. They don't have this outlook, they aren't grounded in prayer and gospel, they live only for their own advantage, they are ruled by their desires, stuck in this death-spiral of self-self-self, poisoning the world in which they work and the homes in which they live. Paul says there is freedom. God will transform our "death-selves" in "selves of God's glory". The quote is "will change our bodies of humiliation into the body of his glory", but the Greek here translated "body" doesn't mean physical body, it means the whole person or "self", so we could read it "he will transform our "self-entrapped selves" into "selves of His glory."

Self-glory is futile. God's glory is a fierce and wondrous love, but to choose it the "It-is-all-about-me" self has to let go. So we have to decide – do we want God's kind of glory?

Welcome to Lent!

From Beyond Us

Date: March 14, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Joshua 5:9-12

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

Psalm

Psalm 32 Page 624, BCP

New Testament Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed

your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Sermon

Picture: Snoopy as vulture. Remember? Hold the image while we talk about the Father and younger brother, the prodigal, and the elder brother, the hard worker, the good example.

When the prodigal returns the Father has to ask, "Is this man my son?" The brother has to ask: "Is this man my brother?" Both must say: "After the way he has treated me?" Elder brother: "Even though I'm faithful, he is rotten, and Dad likes him best anyway?" They have to decide on the stance they are going to take.

The righteous people around Jesus are confused. They ask Jesus what he's up to. They are wondering, "What is God up to in Jesus, who welcomes sinners and eats with them? Has God no pride? Why don't you ignore the sinners and spend all your time with us, the good people? Doesn't God like us best, who have been faithful for many years? If I do well, shouldn't God like me better? Shouldn't I have more honor? Why do sinners get a free pass after all they've done to cause misery?"

Let's start from the Father's point of view. His younger son came to him and said, "I want my inheritance now. I want to get out of here, to take your money, get away from you, live my life by my values, not yours, do as I please, and I don't want to hear any more from you about it."

Why would Jesus tell such a tale? Isn't the father foolishly indulgent? Should he give this resentful, immature child anything at all when he is in this rebellious mode? For years that sounded so wrong that I wondered why Jesus put it this way at all, and then I realized – I'm a slow learner, and these stories only reveal themselves to me over time, you see? – I realized that Jesus posed the question this way because God has done this with all of us. God has given us such gifts, such riches, such good opportunities, and we say to God just what this son said to the father in the story, "Give me everything, and then get out of my way and let me live my own life! I don't need you!"

To protect his own honor he has to reject this child, who is dead to him, and honor only the son who has never betrayed him. The one who stayed and consoled him when the younger son said that his father was dead to him, and left with his premature inheritance. Because this younger brother utterly squandered that extraordinary trust. All the father can reasonably do is treat this faithless son as dead to him, or, maybe, in bountiful compassion, let him have temporary work as a hired hand and live out his well-deserved humiliation in the worker's bunk room while he gets back on his feet, and then go.

Yet to this father, this is not a chance for revenge, or for "I told you so." He has grieved for his dead son, and he is hoping that his son will be changed enough to be restored to him, not as a scoundrel, not as the pariah who wasted so much of what he worked hard all his life to earn, not as a hired hand, but as a

son. He's going to pay for this in the village. The other men are going to call him weak, sentimental, foolish, an old woman, and say he is destroying community standards. He has chosen a difficult stance in a culture that shames people who don't keep up standards. He's got courage.

The elder brother is sulking. He is entirely justified, especially in his honor-based, it is the father who is out of line and unexpected. Naturally the elder brother feels entirely unappreciated, as if the rug were pulled out from under him. Has he not, indeed, done the right thing all these years? And he deserves the fruits of that.

Jesus confronts us with a this: Is forgiveness possible? Does right living matter if you can just be forgiven anyway? Is there any point in being open to a new relationship with someone who's wronged you if they aren't going to be honorable this time? And maybe the question here is really whether the prodigal, a wealthy young man who has fallen so low that he envies the pigs he serves, whether he has, in fact, "come to himself." That's quite a phrase, "He came to himself." What would that mean?

If, in fact, it has happened, what would forgiveness mean? Is it even possible? When I resent the way someone has treated me, wounded me, should I give them another chance? If they have had a "coming to themselves" is it my responsibility to give them another chance? What makes it possible? Is forgiveness about the change in them or a change in me?

And to vex this question even more, we have Paul reminding us that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." We are not the people we were before we knew Christ. We have a new place to stand, in God's forgiveness for us, in a peace and love that is so steady we will never be beyond its reach. Can we stand there and not let it reach out from us to others? Perhaps that is what Paul means when he says we are ambassadors for Christ. Not that we are good at forgiveness, but that we are pretty good advertisements for what forgiveness can do, because we need it, we receive it. It humbles us to know we stand in grace and not in our accomplishments, our righteousness, our perfection. We stand in grace, and so we are a little less condemning of others who need some grace.

Is forgiveness a good thing? Does it just encourage the scoundrel to do wrong again and again? The question changes a bit when I realize that I stand in, that I need, that I count on the grace and mercy of God. . . and that it is relationship to God, not some bare statement of truth, but a relationship that restores me, and if forgiveness happens between me and someone it will be a relational thing.

When I'm being the elder brother, saying that someone doesn't deserve my forgiveness, maybe the reason I'm jealous of the prodigal is that I am not sure my Father loves me, just loves me, not for what I do right, but just because I am. Maybe I'm not doing right because I love my Father. Maybe I'm doing it so my Father will love me, which keeps me from feeling his love as love. Maybe.

I wonder if the addict getting out of jail, or the thief who hopes to go straight or the sibling with whom I'd like to be reconciled have a better change of reforming if I wait for them to shape up and come to themselves or if I hope, and watch a bit, not glaring at them, just hoping quietly out of the corner of my eye? I know that I don't perform my best when people who think I'm hopeless watch my every move, like Snoopy, standing on his doghouse in his vulture pose, ready to pounce mercilessly on his prey!

I'm not going to tell you you ought to be more forgiving. I think forgiveness ought to have some teeth in it, that it shouldn't be just sentimentality and an invitation for further abuse. I think it should come from strength, and be an offer that the other can accept or reject, and it should be offered, gently, in that spirit. And I think you and I have to decide what stance we are ready to take, and whether we have the faith, the courage in Christ, the relationship with God we need to be able to offer forgiveness, because, God knows, it has to come from beyond us.

In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being

Date: March 21, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Psalm 126 Page 782, BCP

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.
2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
3 Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."
4 The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.
5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.
6 Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.
7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

New Testament Lesson: Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Sermon

The gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that God wants us to enter the life of God. Jesus favorite phrase, the Kingdom of God, is better translated "the reign of God" means to live in the orbit of God, in the influence of God, but Jesus takes it so much further when he says "I in the Father and the Father in me, and you in me. . ." We are meant to live in, really, in the life of God. To be a part of the vine, to join in the eternal interplay of the Holy Trinity. "In your infinite love you made us for yourself." We were created to be caught up in the wonder of what God is doing in any time and place in which we find ourselves. There, with sorrow or joy as fits the occasion, to cooperate with God's work, God's hope for that place and those people.

God is meant to be the one in whom we live and have our being.

Saint Paul says, I used to trust in my credentials. I'll list them for you so you know that they were impressive. I thought they'd take me to God, and now I think they are trash, because I've found the mother lode. I wanted to be right with God, and it turns out not to be something I earn, but a gift I've found in Christ, so now I consider the rest as distraction and I pursue a faith-stance toward Christ. If I can live in Christ's life and death and resurrection, that is all I need, my joy and my prize.

In the gospel lesson something cryptic and symbolic is taking place. Do you remember when Martha complained to Jesus about Mary acting like a disciple instead of helping in the kitchen? No more. Today they throw a party in Jesus' honor, celebrating while they can because the opposition to him is mounting on every side and his days are numbered. And part of their plan is that Mary brings an extravagant gift, a show of great love for him, of how they cherish him, and she takes this perfume and uses it to perfume Jesus' feet, rubbing it in with her own hair. All this she does, ceremonially, at the dinner table so that everyone has to think of this as a most extraordinary occasion.

They love him and the life he has brought them. He has invited them into the life of God, and they want him to know how grateful they are. They want him to know that they choose that life, in God, moment by moment for the rest of their lives and all eternity.

As this story shows, what it means to love God in any moment isn't a straight-line kind of question. Sometimes it means to give money to the poor. Sometimes it means to give an extravagant gift. Sometimes it means to name what is really going on in a moment of tension. Sometimes it means to show your gratitude in concrete action. Sometimes it means to throw a party and show someone how much you love them while you still have the chance. If the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is full of love and playfulness and fierce joy and clarity, then it is likely to take us many different places according to our circumstances. Our job and our invitation and our glory is to be open to noticing what God is up to, and joining in.

We were made to share the life of God, in whom we live and move and have our being. Jesus life and death and resurrection were for one reason only: he came to restore us to that life when we had lost our way. He did restore that possibility to humankind. Now it is up to us to choose it for our lives, which we do at baptism, and to choose to enter the dance day by day, the process of sanctification, learning to dance the life of God in our daily lives.

That is why we come again and again to Holy Communion where our life and the life of God are restored to one another. The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for you, preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart, by faith, with thanksgiving.

Palm Sunday

Date: March 28, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Phil. 2:5-11, Lk. 22:14-23:56

Sermon

What does triumph look like? Does it look like riding into town through the city gate on a carpet people have made for you out of their own clothes? Does it look like huge crowds praising God on your account? Does it look like being acclaimed as the one who comes in the name of God? You bet it does! For a homeless preacher and his entourage, this spells success beyond imagining. But we who know the rest of the story know that this isn't it - not yet. This is not the ultimate triumph. And between this triumph and that one lies the scandal, the defeat, the shame of the Cross.

What is failure? Maria Boulding, in her book, *Gateway to Hope*, describes Jesus as history's greatest failure. "The Word was made failure and died among us." She argues that it is failure, not success, that goes to the heart of being human; that Jesus has plumbed the depths of

failure and redeemed it in his flesh. It's not when things are going well, not when they bring out the palm branches for you that you know the meaning of resurrection. But when something fails that you put all your best effort into, all the love of your heart; that's when you are caught up in the fellowship of Christ's death and resurrection. The place where we find the risen Christ is not among the scattered glad rags, but among the wreckage of our own disasters.

Recent scholarship researching the life and times of Jesus has raised some very unsettling possibilities in this area. John Dominic Crossan, that bad boy of New Testament scholars, even suggests that the passion narratives are not historical accounts at all, but prophecies retrojected. That is to say that Christian communities of the first century took messianic prophecies from Hebrew Scripture and arranged the account of the final events of Jesus' life on earth to fit. That perhaps there was no triumphal entry into Jerusalem, no scene before Pilate, no crown of thorns or purple robe, no tomb, no garden, no angel in white.

He argues that we know the Romans crucified thousands of people, but archaeologists have only found one or two skeletons of those crucified. There are no skeletons, he maintains, for a terrifying reason. Crucifixion was the death of shame and humiliation, including the manner of burial. When the Romans were done with them, crucified bodies were simply thrown onto the trash heap, or buried in a shallow grave to be uncovered by dogs.

We can't know what the Resurrection was like, because those who cared what happened to Jesus ran away for fear of their lives, and those who didn't - just didn't care.

I don't mention this to question the Bible. Our faith, after all, doesn't hang on scholarly theories. They are just that - theories. We know there was a cross. We know that the ones who loved him most ran away. We know that the story of Peter's denial is true at the most basic level of human nature because we've been there. And we know how human it is to want to make it better. We see ourselves in the grief of the women at the tomb, We would want to be the bearers of ointment and spices, to have the gracious generosity of Joseph of Arimathea who gave his tomb.

But. What was it that turned Peter around to be the eloquent evangelist of the book of Acts? It wasn't that he was there for Jesus in his hour of need, but that he wasn't. He failed the person he loved most, and then he experienced the Resurrection. He understood the Crucifixion the way someone who had never failed could not. Only if you've known the crucifixion of stark failure can you really understand the ultimate triumph of resurrection.

Jesus' death was almost a by-product of the self-serving ambition of the powerful. Pilate, Herod, the chief priests and the scribes: what they really wanted was simply to be successful. The council wanted to avoid trouble, Herod thought it was a joke, and Pilate, who lost control

of the situation, considered Jesus' life a small price to pay to maintain order. No one was willing to risk failure for the sake of compassion.

And who doesn't want to be successful? Pretty much everybody does - nobody wants to fail. Jesus didn't want to fail, but he was willing to risk failure. He was willing to risk everything. How unlike us. Some of us, anyway. Control freaks, and I sometimes count myself among this group, want everything to be nailed down, prepared for, thought out, lest we fail miserably. We are so afraid to let God be God that we want to do the job first, just in case. It's almost like we try to drag Jesus out of the tomb ourselves. And that's sinful behavior.

This same principle operates when we don't let a beloved child suffer the consequences of his or her actions. It happens when we short-circuit a decision-making process by thinking that we have the answer. It happens when we're afraid to risk difference of theological opinion in our church home for fear the conflict might rip us apart. It happens when we narrow our sights so as to not be aware of the suffering in our own city, our own country, for fear we might not be able to do anything about it.

We cannot truly enter into the mystery of Holy Week blighted by the desire to be successful. Because those of us who would walk this way with Christ must go through their own valley of the shadow. It's not a journey most of us want to take. It doesn't look good. It isn't controllable. Yet it is the way that leads to abundant, eternal life. When we put ourselves in the place of God, imagining that it is by our own magnificent, or puny, or desperate efforts that resurrection happens, then we are on the road that leads to death. Jesus, on the other hand, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient to the death that leads to life. He was willing to risk death for the sake of compassion.

This past Wednesday Bob Fitch told a story about his father Stu when Bob was 8 and they were at Laguna Beach. Stu, swimming in the ocean, lost the crucifix he always wore around his neck. After looking for it and inquiring of the lifeguard, he realized it was gone, and shook his head sadly. "Dad", said Bob, "are you sad because you lost your cross?"

"Yes," said Stu, "I'm sad because I lost it, and because I realize that a symbol isn't enough. There's so much more I still have to surrender."

Is it worth surrendering? Dying to that self that wants everything to be ok? Are you willing to die to your successful self this week? I invite you let God be God: enter into the mystery, take up your cross this week and walk the way that Jesus walked.

Easter: With a Love Not My Own

Date: April 4, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Old Testament Lesson: Baruch 3:9-15, 3:32-4:4 and Ezekiel 37:1-14

Hear the commandments of life, O Israel;
give ear, and learn wisdom!
Why is it, O Israel, why is it that you are in the land of your enemies,
that you are growing old in a foreign country,
that you are defiled with the dead,
that you are counted among those in Hades?
You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom.
If you had walked in the way of God,
you would be living in peace for ever.
Learn where there is wisdom,
where there is strength,
where there is understanding,
so that you may at the same time discern
where there is length of days, and life,
where there is light for the eyes, and peace.
Who has found her place?
And who has entered her storehouses?
But the one who knows all things knows her,
he found her by his understanding.
The one who prepared the earth for all time
filled it with four-footed creatures;
the one who sends forth the light, and it goes;
he called it, and it obeyed him, trembling;
the stars shone in their watches, and were glad;
he called them, and they said, "Here we are!"
They shone with gladness for him who made them.
This is our God;
no other can be compared to him.
He found the whole way to knowledge,
and gave her to his servant Jacob
and to Israel, whom he loved.
Afterwards she appeared on earth
and lived with humankind.
She is the book of the commandments of God,
the law that endures for ever.
All who hold her fast will live,

and those who forsake her will die.
Turn, O Jacob, and take her;
walk towards the shining of her light.
Do not give your glory to another,
or your advantages to an alien people.
Happy are we, O Israel,
for we know what is pleasing to God.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

Psalm 126 Page 782, BCP

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.
2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.
3 Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."
4 The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.
5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.

6 Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.

7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

New Testament Lesson: Romans 6:3-11

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Sermon

Every year the wonderful readings from Scripture for Easter morning are the same. Today, I want to talk about the lessons from the Great Vigil of Easter. They are different, more fun for me. I hope for you, too.

One of them is the Exodus from Egypt, the escape through the Red Sea from the armies of Egypt. Easter is always about Exodus – getting free from what makes us slaves, whether to some Pharaoh or to substances or to our passions or to our pride. We need to be sprung from those jails, brought out from that slavery to a new life with God.

Another is from Baruch, a book of the Apocrapha. It celebrates Holy Wisdom, personified as a woman with incredible gifts to give humankind, unattainable, but for the gift of God. God gave this wisdom in the covenant that came down through Jacob and for a long time they rejoiced in it, but in the time of this story called Baruch, they spurned it, relied on themselves, forgot they were God's people, and the resulting corruption made them easy prey for the Babylonians, who crushed their self-government and carried them off to foreign lands and a new slavery, where they could wonder what had gone wrong and remember the God they had forgotten.

Yet another is Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. If you saw such a sight you'd be, like Ezekiel, overcome with grief. Is this what my people have come to? Is this what our faith has come to? Nothing but skeletons as far as the eye can see. You don't thank someone when they show you a vision like this, even if it is a truth you need to see. Ezekiel is speechless. God asks him what he sees, whether he believes that his people can be restored. Ezekiel can't bear to say what he fears, so he takes the easy way and says, "O Lord, you know." But God wants the hip-bone to be connected to the thigh bone by living sinews, and wants flesh on them and healthy skin. And God wants breath in them, which in Hebrew also means spirit. He wants them to have physical life and strength, but also the spirit to live and relate to God. Yet God does not command these things, but tells Ezekiel, his prophet, to speak for him and command it. And the word of God, spoken by the prophet in this vision, restores the nation to a living community of faith. Ezekiel had to participate, even though it was only the power of God that could bring all this about.

God wants to give freedom. God wants to give wisdom. God wants to give flesh and spirit and strength. On an Easter Day when we are rejoicing in the mystery of how far God will go to rescue us from ourselves, when we are rejoicing in the multitude of spiritual gifts that have been won for us in Christ, when we are just enjoying our common life and giving thanks, it occurs to me that I am asking, "Why?"

Why is God like this? Why is the universe that created us not indifferent to us? Why is it not content when we fail to be what we could be? Why does it not turn its back in disgust and try another experiment, one that has more potential for success than humanity, one that doesn't seem so perverse, so determined to squander all the gifts God has lavished on us.

I'm asking this on an Easter morning when we have gathered to celebrate the riches we have in Christ. Be glad! We have such opportunities in Christ. Cleansing from the guilts of our past; a way forward to healing, the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit to authorize us to stand in and courageously live for the good. We have prayer. We have spiritual friendships. We have a community of worship with whom to ponder the mystery and constantly re-focus our lives on true center. We have the good example and support of many around us in Christian community. We have built-in lifelong learning in a mystery that will always have more for us, always dazzle and challenge us. In all this, the body of Christ, we see Christ coming to us, healing us, authorizing us to heal others and walk with them in wholesome fellowship.

When gang killings are becoming more frequent in all our communities, when people are losing their jobs and their homes, when inequity between rich and poor is steadily growing and the middle class is falling out of the middle class, when our civil discourse is disrespectful, when those who cause economic crises take no responsibility and continue clueless, in such times, where are people around us putting their trust? In a world where going to Church is thought of as either quaint or dangerous, and so many parents don't have a faith to teach their children, or even a knowledge of Jesus' teachings to pass on to them, in such a world, where are people putting their trust? Do the children need faith? And don't parents need God more, with all their cares and responsibilities?

Generation after generation, God hangs in, redeeming those who open their eyes and their ears and their hearts and their hands, and making them agents of peace. Why? An old Christmas hymn puts the question well:

I wonder, as I wander out under the sky,
why Jesus, my savior, did come for to die,
for poor ornery people like you and like I?
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

Well, of course, I don't know. But I want to tell you about a sculpture and a religious experience that has been happening to me for some thirty years now. It began the first time I attended the College of Preachers, an Episcopal institution on the grounds of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. One night I was out walking around the city, and on returning, walking around the grounds of the cathedral, and I was transfixed by the central sculpture of the triptych that dominates the entrance. That panel is probably 20' x 15' and the relief is four feet deep. It looks like a turbulent whirlpool in which eight people are trapped and being spun about. No, maybe not, it is a whirlpool, but maybe they aren't drowning. You know, they are all very beautiful, whirling around there. This isn't like the modern sculpture I've seen. There's nothing disjointed, nothing horrible or twisted about them. They look innocent, why? Oh, their eyes aren't open. Come to think of it, the parts of them that are out of the water are very distinct, very precise. But as you get closer to the water, they are less distinct, is that foam, mist? No, it looks like they are just part of the water. I think they're in the process of being formed, just emerging from chaos into being human. Maybe their eyes aren't open because they aren't even finished yet, not yet conscious. They really are innocent. This is the instant of creation, a glimpse of God's purpose in humankind. They look so beautiful. So full of possibility. They look - loved.

What I found is that I loved them, and of course, the people they represent. I love them with a love that is not mine. That love has taught me a lot about why God has gone to such lengths to restore us to gospel life.

Bright Sunday

Date: April 11, 2009

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

Almost fifty years ago, when I was a missionary priest in the Philippines, I shared with most other clergy and lay people a common dread of the Bishop's secretary. She was a deeply Christian woman, but she had a sharp tongue and always spoke her mind with cutting candor. When she retired, she moved to a retirement home in Pacific Grove. A number of years ago, I visited that place and saw her for the first time in over 20 years. When she saw me, she said, "My goodness how you have changed! Well, time is hard on all of us."

Let's pretend that it isn't the Sunday after Easter, but rather the day after; that it is Easter Monday. In many Greek and Slavic countries, Easter Monday has for centuries been celebrated as a day of joy and laughter, a time of great fun and humor, in honor of the resurrection of Christ. It is said to be a celebration of the cosmic joke that God played on Satan, surprising him by raising Jesus from the dead. The day was called Bright Monday. This custom seems to date back to a sermon preached by the 4th century Eastern saint, John Chrysostom. Whatever its origin, it makes a lot of sense. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples that his death and resurrection would be so that their joy may be full. And Martin Luther once said, "God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy." Another of the great reformers, John Calvin, said, "Sour godliness is the devil's religion." So, in the spirit of Jesus, St. John Chrysostom, Luther, and Calvin, here are some Bright Sunday jokes that I have heard and that have delighted me.

**First, there is the story of a man who fell into a deep coma in 2010, and didn't wake up until 2050. The first thing he did, when he came to, was call his stockbroker. "How are my investments doing?" he asked. "Well, said his broker, "your IBM stock is worth five million dollars, and your AT&T stock is worth four million." "I'm rich! I'm rich!" the man shouted out. But, just then, the telephone operator broke in and said, "Your three minutes are up. Please deposit one million dollars."

** Two old ladies went to the horse races for the first time. They saw that people were making bets, and even though they had no idea how it worked, they picked a horse in one of the races and put a two-dollar bet on it. Their horse came in last. On the way home, one said to the other, "Rosie, it was a great day, but I am so sad that we didn't win on our bet." Rosie replied, "Never mind, Sadie, what would we have done with a horse anyway."

**A provocatively dressed woman sidled up to a man in a dark bar, looked him in the eyes, and whispered, "I will do anything you want for a hundred dollars." The man looked her over and said, "Anything?" "Anything," she replied. So he took out his wallet, gave her a hundred dollars, and said, "Paint my house."

**A young, newly ordained Roman Catholic priest was assigned to the foreign missions. On his way overseas, he stopped to visit his married sister and her husband, Herbie. The couple complained to the priest that they had been married for five years, but had no children. They had been to many doctors, but had been told that there was nothing that could be done to help them. The priest advised them to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes, to light a candle, and to say a prayer. He told them that many miracles have happened that way, and many wishes have been granted. Ten years later, the priest was returning on furlough, and visited his sister and her eight children. "Where is Herbie," he asked. His sister replied, "He's gone back to Lourdes to blow out that crummy candle."

**Then, there is the one about a man who dressed as Napoleon. His wife, fed up after years of this, asked him to see a psychiatrist. The doctor said, "What is your problem?" The man said, "I have no problem. I am one of the most famous people in the world. I have a great army behind me. I have all the money I will ever need, and I live in great luxury." "Then why are you here," asked the doctor. "It's because of my wife," said the man. "She thinks she is Mrs. Levine."

**Another man was admitted to a mental hospital and, on his first day, there was a group therapy session with some of his co-patients. The therapist asked the new man what his name was. He said, "My name is Napoleon." The therapist said, "Who told you your name was Napoleon?" "God did," said the man. One of the other patients immediately spoke up and said, "I did not!"

**There was a fellow who went to a Catholic priest and asked him a question that had been troubling him. "Father," he said, "I need to know, is sex work or play?" The priest replied that he was celibate and didn't know about such things, but that he would ask an opinion from Rome. The man said, "Thank you, but that would take much too long." So, he went to see a Presbyterian minister, and asked him, "Is sex work or play?" The minister said that he really didn't know, but that he would study scripture for a week or so, and try to let him know. "No," said the man, "I need to know sooner than that." Then he went and asked the local rabbi the same question. The rabbi answered straightaway, "Sex is definitely play." Puzzled, the man asked him how he could answer so quickly. "Well," said the rabbi, "if sex were work, my wife would have the maid do it."

**Finally, let me tell you a wonderful story about one of the medieval popes and a rabbi. The rabbi was the leader of a small Jewish community that had lived for many, many generations in a part of Vatican City. The pope one day ordered the Jewish group to go live somewhere else. The rabbi challenged the pope to debate the matter, and the pope agreed. But he said the debate would have to be in pantomime, a cultural form that was popular in that time and at which the pope was an expert. When the day for the debate came, the pope's party and the rabbi's party met at the appointed place. The pope opened the pantomime debate by throwing open his arms, to which the rabbi responded by boring his right index finger into the palm of his left hand. The pope then held out three fingers. The rabbi responded by holding out one finger. Then the pope took bread and wine and began silently to celebrate the Eucharist. The rabbi took out an apple and took a big bite. The pope said, sadly, "You have won; you may stay and live where you are." On their way home, the pope's followers said to him, "Holy Father, why did we lose?" He replied, "I was defeated by superior theology. I opened wide my arms, meaning 'God is everywhere.' The rabbi pushed his finger into his palm, saying, 'Yes, but God is right here!' I put out three fingers, meaning 'God is three.' But he put out one finger, replying 'Yes, but God is one.' I said the Eucharist, meaning 'God is love.' But he bit into an apple, saying, 'Yes,

but humans are sinful.' What could I reply? He had won with superb theology." Meanwhile, on their way home, the rabbi's followers said to him, "Rabbi, why did we win?" He replied, "I really don't know. The pope opened his arms, meaning 'You must leave and go far away.' I replied by boring my finger into the palm of my hand, meaning, 'We are staying right here.' He held out three fingers, meaning, 'I'll give you three days.' I answered with one finger, to say 'We're not moving one inch.' Then he took out his lunch, so I took out mine. I haven't any idea why we won!"

Well, that's enough jokes and stories for this Bright Sunday. You know a good love affair always has lots of humor as well as passion, and Christianity is, above all else, a love story. Alan Jones, who used to be Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco once said that we Christians make a terrible mistake if we think of our faith as a cluttered inventory of beliefs. We can entirely lose God in such foolishness. Our God is love, not a theology book, and Christianity is and always must be a love story. Joyce Cary, the late English novelist wrote a delightful book about an artist, titled *THE HORSE'S MOUTH*. In it, the rakish and pixie like painter, Gully Jimpson, is dying and is being attended by a very sober nun. Gully says to her, "Why don't you enjoy life, Mother? I would be laughing all around my neck at this minute, if my shirt weren't a bit on the tight side." The nun replies, "It would be better for you to pray." And Gully says, "Ah, tis the same thing, Mother, tis the same thing."

Christopher Fry once said, "Comedy is an escape not from truth, but from despair. A narrow escape into faith." This attitude is found in the Western Church in the medieval concept of *hilaritas*, which did not mean mindless giggling, but that even at a moment of disaster one may wink or smile, because you know that God is going ultimately to triumph.

So, here is a post-Easter, post-resurrection, post-cosmic-joke-on-Satan wish for us all: May our faith leave the despair of human life well behind us. May it put all our troubles and all our vanities into proper perspective. And may it give us lives that are not only rich, full, and passionate, but also lots of fun.

Amen.

Atonement #1 - Anselm

Date: April 18, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Sermon:

Welcome to an interactive sermon series. These three sermons will be exploring a central tenet, but not doctrine, of the Christian faith. We will be exploring atonement. How does the life, death and resurrection of Christ heal our humanity and our relationship to God?

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;

That says what happened. It goes on to say things about the forgiveness of sins and the life of the world to come. It doesn't say what it was about Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection that brings us these benefits. And we like explanations.

I want to let you in on something. The Bible has lots to say about these things. It has a number of metaphors for what God accomplished in the whole of the Christ event. But – here's the surprise . . . the metaphors didn't come first. And when they did come they didn't arrive in sealed envelopes with the signet of the Almighty on them. First what happened is Mary Magdalene encountered the Risen Jesus and he spoke to her, and told her to tell the disciples he was risen. Then Peter saw an empty tomb and was shocked into a state of profound and confused ecstasy. Then some disheartened disciples headed out of town met a mysterious stranger and spoke of their disappointment and he made sense of Jesus' death for them, said it was necessary for the Messiah to come to a bad end, quoted the Scriptures, the Servant Songs from Isaiah, and so on, and that night at dinner they realized, with all this hindsight, that they were talking with the Risen Christ. Next, maybe was ten disciples, maybe more, but we know Judas was dead and Thomas wasn't present, so at least ten were in a locked room and Jesus showed up and gave them God's peace, then breathed the Holy Spirit on them and charged them to forgive sins – he sort of told them to be him, wherever they went. A week later, he came again when Thomas was there, and encouraged them to believe. And somewhere in there he found Peter and some of the others fishing – not what he had told them to be doing. He fed them some barbecued fish and asked them what they would do with their lives and insisted they feed his sheep. . . no matter what the cost to themselves.

This is what came first. Not doctrines. So when we want explanations we have to get in a long line with other people who wanted them before we did, people who have spent their lives

being Jesus' presence, serving the power of the Holy Spirit they saw working in lives all around them. They couldn't necessarily tell you how the Christ event had transformed their lives, only that it did, and was continuing to do so.

This is how it begins, and then we begin to create language for it. The early Christians struggled with the Hebrew Scriptures a lot. Their stories told of God's desire to have a moral people, a just people, a people who experienced shalom – the good life. Of God's desire that people be justly governed, and of heroes among their people who had thrown off oppression from time to time. Of the prophet's demands for justice to all and the call for true worship - not only ritual and sacrifice, but also integrity in action.

Like any people, they sometimes heard the parts they wanted to hear: that God would throw off the oppressors, and the part about the good life. So it was hard for them when Jesus, who seemed to be the Christ, died the way he did. He did not himself enjoy long life and prosperity, and died disgraced as a blasphemer and a pretender, and at his death it seemed he'd come to nothing but shame.

But instead he became the lens through which they began to read the Hebrew Scriptures. His manner of dying, his willingness to embrace his fate with integrity, his words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." – all this convinced them that God was not vengeful, but determined to save rebellious humans. His words took on new significance for them as they began to see life not through their expectations of empire but from their experience of how he lived and died and rose. Their experience of Jesus risen, their Lord and brother, convinced them that they had to see God as loving, reconciling, forgiving, able to overcome death.

But they had no explanations.

I want to start with a theory of the Atonement that is often taught as the only theory. I want to deal with it today, out of order, because it is very distracting. So many people are offended by it, and so many are attracted by it, both believing that it is some kind of absolute, and that conversation and even understanding to a sudden halt. Let's get past that.

St. Anselm was born in 1033, in Italy, and died in 1109 as Archbishop of Canterbury. He was the foremost theologian of his century, a steady worker, and the author of *Why God Became Human*. In this work he tried to show that human beings had given up their ability to do right, lost their freedom to be just - all through sheer egocentricity. Now they were enslaved to their own selfish desires with a momentum they could not break. Many of us have experienced just that.

Anselm went on: humans had affronted God by choosing deciding they could get along better on their own. What was needed was a human who chose to love God with all of their heart and

mind and soul and strength. Then human rectitude would have a beginning.

Human beings were sold out to their own rebellious self-rule. God couldn't just ignore the subject as if we were doing just fine, cheating and killing one another. That would leave us forever in our miserable state. So Anselm thought it was necessary for God to become human. The fully God/ fully human Jesus Christ would be able to make the free choice, the freeing choice. And the affront to God's dignity that was human rebellion would have an alternative – and by God's own gift.

Now, I don't know if you are moved by that theory or if it makes you mad. We are going to find out in the forum next week. Well ask: How does it help? How does it hurt? But first I want to clear away one or two misunderstandings. Anselm and others use terms like "substitution" (of Christ's suffering for the suffering that would naturally have come to us), and "satisfaction" of a debt we owed to God. But please, don't go misuse the metaphor when you deal with this. When the Son of God dies on the Cross, it is not as if God the Father is a literal Father and Jesus is a literal, subordinate, other person. Take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously. Take the infinite seriously. It is God who becomes a human being, who lives and dies and experiences being human at first hand. It is not abuse of one person by another, for they are, together with the Holy Spirit, the One perfect unity at the heart of everything. The Christ will have said, "Send me." And the Holy Spirit will have said, "No, no, I'll go, I love them."

Human bondage is conceived by Anselm, I think, as the inability to do what we know we should do, the loving thing, the thing that would make us whole and happy.

It is overcome by God's gift on the Cross, after which we can live as one with Christ, no longer in our own will, but in God's, feeling the Christ in us, being the Christ in the world. Our lives are no longer just our own.

We are now free and fearless to live for God and others, with a will that is not thwarted at every turn by the illusions of our own ego and its temptations.

I'd invite you to ponder the questions that are raised by this theory. Does there have to be substitution? To satisfy God or to satisfy us? Would God become human? Could God have the humility to be human and play fair? Does God love you, and me, that much?

Next week I'll talk about Peter Abelard and a much earlier theory.

Atonement #2 – Peter Abelard

Date: April 25, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Revelation: 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Sermon:

This sermon is intended to continue last week, to provoke discussion in our adult forum at 10:15, both this week, and perhaps next. Next week will have a different topic. The purpose of this series is not academic. The atonement, if it becomes real for us, is a lived reality. God makes peace with us and we begin to make God's peace with others. The Holy Spirit is at work in this room this morning, and it is for the sake of changed hearts that we talk about these things. God is trying to win our hard hearts.

Last week I spoke of Anselm of Canterbury and his substitutionary theory of the Atonement. Humankind had affronted God by choosing self-rule, and had lost the freedom to choose what was right and loving. We owed God, each of us, a debt we could not pay, and God, personally, paid it by entering this life, suffering the results of our sin and estrangement as an innocent; thereby giving us freedom from fear of God and the promise of heaven.

Some of you criticize Anselm's theory. Let me quote a very strident objection that I received in an email a few years back: the fellow writes, "I do not believe God is a bloodthirsty, ledger-keeping debt broker, insisting on a pound of flesh for human sin. I do not believe that God is the cosmic child-abuser, begetting only one child and then demanding his slaughter as vicarious sacrifice for all fellow human beings." . . . of course it does make for a very nice guilt and fear club, . . . a nice way to control people. . . [and a way to keep those who already feel unworthy or unaccepted in society feeling disconnected from God] That is not a worthy critique of Anselm's writing, but it is certainly what many have believed and been mis-taught, and as such the sentiments are worth hearing.

Consider this, too, which is also worth hearing: When someone critiques Anselm's theory of substitution, others often speak up and say, if I may try to summarize, that they appreciate the astounding gift Christ made to them and all humankind and feel they had indeed incurred a debt that one couldn't handle without God's help. This feeling of gratitude can go to the very depths of our being. . . and it leads us to another theory.

Peter Abelard developed a theory that started with St. Augustine was a teacher and monk, sometimes acclaimed and sometimes condemned for his ideas. While his theory of the atonement is not as widely held, it does not share some of the flaws of Anselm's and it is, I think, an essential element of any adequate theory. Abelard's is a development of the thought of St. Augustine and those before him.

Abelard taught that our estrangement from God (and of course, from one another and our best selves), was caused by our simple, everyday, practical contempt for the will of God. Ignoring God's will, we, naturally found ourselves in a mess, a rebellious mess.

In this theory God has no obligation to do anything about it. We are the willful ones spoiling the joyful existence God has created us to share. But God is so loving as to step into human life and take a punishment that should have been yours and mine. It isn't God's punishing Jesus, it is human cussedness resenting Jesus' vision. [read about this again, say it better!!!!!!!!!!] And Abelard's theory, born, of course, of his experience and observation, is that something happens in human beings who are changed by Christ. They look at the Savior who lived and suffered and died for them and if they recognize him as God, their rebellion against God melts away. They begin to see that God's way is so much more full of love and meaning than the way they are scratching out a life in a hard world that they want to sign up to help. With our cooperation God is free to help us live – the God-ward dimension of our lives is restored. We no longer see God as high-handed and hostile and demanding, but as loving and good and great and giving, and so we can, finally, accept help. We can live with God's kind of love in our hearts, reaching out to all sorts of people, holding no grudges, forming bonds of understanding and community wherever we find enmity, and we will do so because that is what it means to understand what Christ has done for us.

Notice that in this theory you aren't earning God's forgiveness, nor is it wrested from an angry God on the cross. It was always yours and mine, but we were too stubborn and sullen and self-absorbed to understand until we saw Jesus' example.

There is no "satisfaction" of an angry God here. The suffering Jesus the Christ does on our behalf isn't to appease an angry God. It is done for love of us, he lives as one of us and suffers as we do. Our trust is low, we respond with fury. But seeing how he dies, and seeing his resurrection, we come to understand that God is not the exacting one, the angry one, we are. Thus in Abelard's theory the ones who are satisfied by Jesus' death are the ones whose hearts are changed by it.

There is no "satisfaction" of an angry God in this theory, but there is much sacrifice, much oblation, much self-giving. God turns out, upon showing up in this world, to be considerably more determined to save us than the prophets have advertised, and to do it entirely without violence. Far from vengeful, God is forgiving, yet determined that only our free choice will change our lives. We may remain in rebellion if we choose.

It can even be construed that God was simply listening to rebellious humans, furious with the unfairness of life, and that the gift of the Abelardian Christ was a heart-felt and generous

response to that, by a God with courage, grit, tenacity, and great love. Let me share a song by Sydney Carter that is very Abelardian in its outlook.

It was on a Friday morning that they took me from the cell,
And I saw they had a carpenter to crucify as well.
You can blame it on to Pilate, You can blame it on the Jews,
You can blame it on the Devil, Its God I accuse!
It's God they ought to crucify, Instead of you and me,
I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree.
You can blame it on to Adam, You can blame it on to Eve,
You can blame it on the Apple, but that I can't believe.
It was God that made the Devil, and the woman and the man,
And there wouldn't be an apple if it wasn't in the plan.
It's God they ought to crucify, Instead of you and me,
I said to the carpenter a hanging on the tree.
Now Barabbus was a killer, and they let Barabbus go.
but you are being crucified for nothing here below.
But God is up in heaven, and he doesn't do a thing,
With a million angels watching, and they never move a wing.
It's God they ought to crucify, Instead of you and me,
I said to the carpenter a hanging on the tree.
To hell with Jehovah, to the carpenter I said,
I wish that a carpenter had made the world instead,
Goodbye and good luck to you, our ways will soon divide,
Remember me in heaven, the man you hung beside.
It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me,
I said to the carpenter a hangin' on the tree.¹

What if God's answer to all our pain and anger is: "I haven't left you alone. Life is worth living. I share it with you." What if?

We'll talk in forum!

¹ *Friday Morning*, by Sydney Carter, 1960, assigned to Galliard Ltd. Copyright 1969 Galliard Ltd, Stainer & Bell Limited, London, Assigned Galaxy Music Corporation 2121 Broadway, New York, NY 10023 All Rights reserved.

Atonement #3- The Pattern Theory

Date: May 2, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Sermon:

Over the last few weeks I've given you a series on theories of the atonement. There are copies on the web site and in the back of the church if any of you want to catch up. Anselm's diagnosis is that we've affronted God and broken the relationship and lost our strength of will in the process. Abelard's diagnosis of our predicament is that we've fearfully rebelled against God and hardened our hearts.

I've had responses from many of you, and enjoyed the discussion in forums. One of you wrote me that you appreciated Jesus' life much more than his death and resurrection. I wrote back, "I appreciate your analysis, and you're not taking theological words for granted. But I submit that Jesus' impact makes no sense without his death and resurrection. These three are one piece. The fundamentalists and the guilt-ridden try to have his death without much of his life, and to make his resurrection an act of aggression that will eventually lead to brutal triumph over all who aren't fundamentalists. We don't want to reverse their error by having only his life, without the death and resurrection. Frankly, without his ignoble death and his stunning transformation, he would have been forgotten. Until then his followers were not courageous people.

Because of this perspective I was very pleased with the closing thought in this email which said: "I [accept] and love Him because He lived dangerously and did not run in order to keep the faith for my sake, so that I would know about Him 2000 yrs. later." [Italics not original]

Let's look today at another theory espoused by Blessed Odo of Tournai in the twelfth century and C.S. Lewis in the twentieth. What if it weren't that God was unable to forgive us unless someone died in our place, or just that our hearts were hard, but rather that we were drowning and needed a lifeguard? Or that we were sinking as a culture because we were all so engrossed with ourselves that we didn't invest in a common good, afraid we might come out losers otherwise, more interested in being ahead of others than in being whole?

What if we were, to be specific, more interested in what was fashionable than what was true? More interested in what was entertaining than what made us wise? More interested in what kept us distracted than in the basic needs of the poor? More interested in how we look than in who we actually were? (Looking good has become a competitive sport). More

interested in relief from stress than in making God 's world better? More interested in getting ahead than in doing an honest day's work? Because all these things pit us against one another. They all rob our common life of our concern and energy, so that the common life suffers, and humanity is in trouble.

And what if human institutions are structured after this fear and posturing, so that they make it very hard to be loving even when we try? Governments, languages, financial systems, church hierarchies, the lot. What if our institutions are the powers and principalities that hold us afraid and they need to be held accountable as much as we do?

What if God in heaven saw all of us drowning because we were all trying to get out of the pool at once? Or just amusing ourselves going off the diving board willy-nilly without looking to see who might be in harm's way? What if God saw that our careless behavior was not only risking our lives but making them hateful as we damage one another. The stories are awful about how people trample one another trying to get away from a fire in a crowded theater, or at a European soccer game in a stampede when they all could have made it without trampling anyone to death, if they had thought of one another. That is closer to the situation we really experience, isn't it, so many people trying to be kings in their little fiefdoms?

Perhaps God sees us as whitewashed sepulchers, as nicely dressed dead people, rotting inside, but "lookin' good!" And perhaps God is sad and has great compassion for us in our foolishness. And if the Christ comes from heaven and enters this life as Jesus to live and die and rise for such folks, it is not because God wants vengeance, or because their hearts are hard, but because these unpretty things God loves just don't know how to die. God doesn't want them to claw at and destroy one another anymore. God doesn't want them to pathetically pretend to be living anymore. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

Trouble is, these creatures won't be alive as long as they try to be good-looking enough, fun enough, rich enough, secure enough. So long as they try to be good enough or better than, they'll continue to hide their true selves, and compete for respect and no one will really know them. The life they are clinging to is really death, and till they let it go there is no transformation.

According to this theory, in other words, they need not someone to save their sorry lives, but someone to show them how to die. If they can turn their suffering and fear into a willing surrender of self God will be able to give them a birth from above. But it can't be done because we cling so to the only life we know.

Then Jesus came along. . . and looking back from the vantage point of the resurrection, they realized his death was not an accident. God shows up and lives a life that isn't posturing. How does Jesus manage this? He is God come to live among us. How does God make it authentic? By

living a real human life, full of sorrow and struggle, joy and striving. But in this one life, God is never out of sight and mind. In this one life, there is no play-acting, no posturing to manipulate what others are thinking, no dressing up his clothes or his story so that he will be accepted or envied. He lives full of God, and so he gives people to one another as gifts, not competitors. He demands surrender of all posturing and fear and ego so that God's love can flow through them to others.

His authenticity embarrasses the most powerful pretenders, those determined to be better than others. What he offers is to love and be loved, not to be "better than". So he is opposed, hated, disposed of. But his death turns out to be God's triumph. God returns him to the scene, victor now over the more terrible death. And his friends, some of whom were his sworn enemies before, find in him a pattern of life, a way of death that leads to life.

So Jesus has freed those who love him from egocentricity, so their gift now is to be one with others. They are freed by a community of love that Jesus began, to be the sign of God's reign. Freed to be a body that needs all its parts in submission to their rightful head, a body that keeps them in the abundant life. And what are the results. Prophetic people who don't submit to the seductions of the powers and principalities. Shakers adopting children and raising them in God's love. Christians building hospitals for those who can't afford them, or refusing to accept that the way things are is the way they'll always be, changing the culture, whatever culture, to more resemble God's vision.

In the breakthrough humanity that Jesus began, we have hope and we live as citizens of the kingdom to come. For us this means, "carrying our cross" and "being a fool for Christ". This is the way of hope. It doesn't hurt us to be misunderstood, maligned, or hated for following the master's way. It does give us the deepest joy as we learn to love one another in the Body and in the world God has given us. Conversion and baptism aren't the end, but just the beginning of what God is working in us. The way is sometimes difficult, but it is abundant, full of worth, a life well-spent. Alleluia.

We're Already Free!

Date: May 16, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Psalm 97 Page 726, BCP

New Testament Lesson: Acts 16:16-34 and Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

With Paul and Silas, we came to Philippi in Macedonia, a Roman colony, and, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds;

then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

* * *

At the end of the visions I, John, heard these words:

"See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

"It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Gospel: John 17:20-26 and John 12:1-8

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." Amen.

* * *

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Sermon

E Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi, a small city in ancient northern Greece. If you drew a line west from Istanbul and a line north from Athens, they would intersect just about where the Roman garrison, mines and city of Philippi were.

Paul and Silas healed a slave woman who was being used by her masters as a fortune-teller. They were then jailed and beaten by the authorities for the crime of interfering with commerce - the woman's former condition was marketable for her masters. But Paul and Silas, praying in the jail and singing songs of faith, were miraculously set free. And if what you heard in that story was a miraculous jailbreak, and that's all you heard, you missed the real story.

Paul and Silas may have been released by an angel, but they stay right where they are, for the jailer's sake. They say, I think, "We're already free." Everybody knows how understanding the Romans were with jailers whose prisoners get away. The jailer is going to take his own life before the authorities find out and torture him. But Paul and Silas say, "This man is in despair, but we're already free." And they stay right where they are, for his sake and to give him the freedom they already have.

That is what we can be, if we let God work freely in us. Paul and Silas had a new love of life, a new walk with God, a new hope in Jesus. They are not afraid of Rome, the jailer is caught up in the domination system, and he is afraid of Rome. They are already free.

The love of Jesus has infused their souls with joy. The domination system of fear that crushes the dreams of so many – it doesn't crush them. They are already free. The economic temptation that rules the hearts and minds of so many - it doesn't rule them, they are already free. The relentless exercise of arbitrary power that whittles away at the will and perseverance of so many, no longer interests Paul and Silas. They are already free.

When the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, then the love of Jesus has a way to bring about our growth, our freedom, bit by bit, showing us God's love, showing us what, in our character, in our fears, in our past, that is in the way of that love being expressed and infused into us.

That is why, today, we ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. “. . . Send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and lead us to that place where our savior Christ has gone before. . .” Because if we ask, God will give. If we allow, God will work in us.

Now this is a special day to ask for the Holy Spirit, and I don't want us to miss it. The Holy Spirit isn't some esoteric gift that some Christians have and some can do without, but we often don't ask and don't receive as much as God wants to give us of the grace and transformation of our character. But we could. We are entitled to all the riches of Christ.

We pray for this all the time in the Lord's prayer. All the time. We call God, "Father". Abba, loving parent, "Dada" really. Then we ask for the really important things for which we depend on God, day to day:

God's name to be honored – that is, for people to remember themselves, uphold their own dignity and that of others.

God's kingdom to come – that is, for all our actions to be carried out consciously, as being done in front of God, and with God's blessing.

God's will to be done as in God's own presence – you see, these three: Name, Kingdom, Will, are really one request.

Give us today the bread we need for the morrow: that is, let us depend on God, day to day, because, even if we have bread for many days to come, we are held in existence, this whole cosmos, by the love of the one who created us, in whom we live and move and have our being. Micah called it, "Walk humbly with your God."

Forgive us our sins – because the receiving of grace and the flow of it through us to others is the lifeblood of healthy community, and God's gift is Jesus.

Save us from the time of trial, that is, from the temptation that would destroy us, crush our faith, reduce us to despair, so instead, Lord, when the evil that assaults us is greater than we are, deliver us, by the power of the Cross of Christ.

The entire prayer is an attempt to focus on the reign of God, to invite the Holy Spirit to guide our lives, to become those who travel light in this world. What we need to stay in grace is to watch for the kingdom and honor the name,

to depend on God for the needs of the day,

we need mercy for ourselves and others,

and the Spirit to sustain us through trials and deliver us from the darkest nights.

With these few things, we can complete the journey, negotiate our lives with hope and courage, no matter what we go through. We can travel light, because we are already free.

Earthquakes and floods, and man-made environmental disasters can get us down, but they can't make us give up, because we are already free.

We may be in economic straits, like so many these days, but we don't lose hope, because we are already free.

We may be stunned sometimes by grief, but we don't quit putting one foot in front of the other to share Jesus' work, because we are already free.

We may be knocked down by illness, but we don't lose our courage, because, like Paul and Silas singing hymns in the jail, we are already free.

I want that freedom for each of you, as I want it for myself. I remember Bishop Bob Mize, once the Episcopal Bishop of Namibia, who used to so relish the prayer for the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, as they are in the prayer for baptism. When I knew him he was in his late eighties, and his inflection was so fervent, his intention so focused, his hope for the transformation of the candidate so deep, that it didn't seem melodramatic when he prayed,

Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them
an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to
persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy
and wonder in all your works.

This is my prayer for you, as we prepare for Pentecost, and that our lives may be godly. I don't want the world – not the best it has and not the worst it can do – to distract you from the riches God wants to give to us and through us. And there's nothing that has the power to stop that, because when we're in Christ, we're already free.

Trinity Sunday

Date: May 30, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15

Sermon

Does not Wisdom call,
And does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
At the crossroads she takes her stand;
Beside the gates in front of the town,
At the entrance of the portals she cries out,
“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.”

A drone flies over a desert village in one of the “stans”, a place we’ve never heard of. A bomb drops, and people are killed. In Minneapolis, second-generation Somali American youths whose parents were refugees, who speak no Arabic, are persuaded to go back to a country they’ve never seen, where they become terrorists, and are killed. In Nigeria the men come in the middle of the night. A whole village is wiped out that sat on top of oil that somebody wanted. In Sudan the election is rigged so the North can control the same black gold that lies under the war-torn South; the stuff we put in our cars so we can get to church in the morning. In the Gulf of Mexico an oil slick covers 2,500 square miles from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, brought to you by a company whose recent advertising slogan, I kid you not, was “BP: bringing oil to America’s shores”. Wisdom stands at the church door and calls to us:

My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold
And my yield than choice silver.
I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice.

So the oil is refined and the gas is pumped into our cars and our jets and all those other things we use it for, and then our combustion of fossil fuels heats up the planet. Bill McKibben, in his latest book, *Eaarth* (with 2 a's), argues that it's too late to save the planet we're used to. The door of sustainability, he argues, has already closed. If we can see that species are becoming extinct, that the north pole will soon be open water, that coral reefs are dying, that oysters can't form shells, that deserts are spreading,

then it's not only foolish but damning to pretend we live in the world we used to know, no matter how safe and comfortable that fiction may be. He writes:

We need to understand the world we've created and consider, urgently, how to live in it. Which doesn't mean that the change we must make – or the world on the other side – will be without its comforts or beauties. Reality always comes with beauty, sometimes more than fantasy. But hope has to be real. It can't be hope that scientists will turn out to be wrong or that President...Obama can somehow fix everything. Obama can help, but precisely to the degree he's willing to embrace reality, to understand that we live on the world we live on, not the one we might wish for. Maturity is not the opposite of hope; it's what makes hope possible."

Last Saturday on the way to Elkhorn Slough, St. John's hikers talked about how difficult it is to keep listening to the news, to countenance the world as it is. We talked about the people we know who've just tuned out, and the temptation we feel to do the same. Why is it so difficult to hear the voice of Wisdom, who calls to us from the time of Solomon, 3,000 years ago, who calls to us still? What tools does scripture offer us to deal with the problems of our global village, where we are all so connected in a web of consequences? And what if the doctrine that gives us strength and life is anathema to someone else on the other side of the world, or next door?

In the Muslim/Christian dialog called "A Common Word", the Muslim authors posit that love of God and love of neighbor are the ties that bind the People of the Book together. Reading on, however, they cannot understand how Christians, who profess to believe in one God, can have a doctrine of the Trinity. And yet, it is our understanding of the mystery of the Trinity that gives us a way to comprehend how deeply we are all connected. The Trinity is above all a household of love. Within the Trinity, creation and wisdom and truth inform one another in a never-ending circle to create a wholeness of love. But as St. Augustine, a North African theologian said, outside of the Trinity, its actions are indivisible. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in his response to "A Common Word", notes that as Christians, we believe we share in a limited way in the divine life itself. That is, "we seek to show in our lives some of the characteristics of God's own love. We know that this may mean putting ourselves at risk; to love where we can see no possibility of love being returned is to be vulnerable,

and we can only dare to do this in the power of God's Holy Spirit, creating in us some echo, some share of Christ's own love."

St. Paul puts it another way. He says that we have peace with God through Christ and the grace he offers us, And God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. One of the keys to this mystery, and this is so counter-cultural – is suffering. Suffering, Paul says, "produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us". Which is pretty much what Bill McKibben said about a reality check on global warming, only different. It is a deep engagement with the world as it is, in dialog with God's never-failing love that is the antidote to the news fatigue we felt on the way to hike at Elkhorn Slough.

And so we have this mystery of the Trinity, the thing that makes Christians really funky to other monotheists, and yet it offers us a way to live together in hope and love with people who are different from us in a world where suffering is all too real. This is not a doctrine you're ever going to be able to pin down. If you're really determined, you will find it spelled out at the back of the prayer book, in the Athanasian Creed, hammered out at the Council of Alexandria in 362, but, take it from me, don't bother. Because you won't understand it, either. In the words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, she will guide you into all truth."

The Trinity is a picture of God's love the way it works in the world, with no male or female, no senior or junior, no before or after. It is the living symbol of love as a manifestation of community. It takes suffering and transforms it into wholeness. It shows us the life of the world redeemed. Engage this mystery and our reality at a deep level. Explore, unravel, receive them together, and step into greater hope, greater joy, greater love, greater knowledge and communion with the three, the one.

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Date: June 6, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24)

The word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

[After this, the son of the woman, the mistress of the house at Zarephath, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."]

Psalm 146 Page 803, BCP

1 Hallelujah!

Praise the LORD, O my soul! *

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the LORD their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.

7 The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; *
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The LORD shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

New Testament Lesson: Galatians 1:11-24

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Gospel: Luke 7:11-17

Soon after healing the centurion's slave, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Sermon

Stories like these just make me miserable. I mean, I love this bit of St. Paul's history, and it tells us a lot about his work. But these miracle stories, some of the most spectacular in the Hebrew Scriptures or the Gospels, they bother me today. I could respond, I suppose, in so many ways: these people had faith, a good example, these are moments that made them know God was with them, I could rejoice with them. Or I could question the way they observed and understood the world, and whether these things happened as they are told. But that is not what is bothering me.

God gives the widow of Zarephath meal and oil to outlast the famine. God allows Elijah to raise the widow's son from death or the appearance of death. God allows Jesus to raise from the dead the only son of a widow in Nain even as he's about to be buried. I struggle when we tell these stories, because I don't want to doubt God, and I don't want to have false hope, and I don't want to give false hope, and I do want wonderful things to happen.

I fight my limits. There are things in my family and in my world that I want to be able to fund. Things in our children's lives I'd like to participate in. There are needs that need to be met, all around us. I hate the limitations we have to live with. Don't we all? Every one of us can tell that story, whatever our circumstances.

Does this mean I'm ungrateful for all my blessings? I don't think so. It means I'm having trouble with trust.

When one of us gets sick, I wish I had the prayer-power that Elijah had on this occasion, that Jesus had during the funeral procession in this morning's story. I wish we could cure all diseases. And reading

these stories together is painful when the need is acute, when people are in pain, or sick, when we have loved ones whose lives are in danger.

I am deeply grateful that I've learned to live in the providence of God a little through the years. That I've learned the courage to pray for healing, and watch all the things that God does, sometimes in body, sometimes in growth and faith, sometimes in healing relationships and the inner life. Prayer does heal, or God does. But it doesn't heal everything, and I hate the limitations.

And I'm grateful that I'm learning to live in-between. I get angry at God a lot. I'm grateful for the Psalms, for their language of being so honest with God, full-throated anger, heart-felt praise, it's all in there, and I need it, because I need to be honest with God, and I need to learn to live in God's world, not mine. I pray for what I hope for – boldly – and then I surrender and report for duty.

I don't try to get the prayer pared down to what my little mind can get itself around. I don't try to protect myself from disappointment by only asking for what I'm sure God will give. Who would I be kidding? I'd still know what I wanted, and know I was trying to kid God, and God would know what I wanted and what I was afraid to ask for. So I ask. I ask with all my heart. And I remember that I'm not God. Is this the time for a miracle? Which kind of miracle?

I know God loves us, each one. I've seen it, I've felt that love for myself and I've felt the power of God's love for others. I know God loves us, and part of me knows that God knows how to be God, so I ask and I trust. When I can't do that, I yell at God for a while. And then I ask and I trust as best I can. And God works.

I am convinced of this, that God works. I'm convinced that our prayers are heard and that God works. Not always in the way I want, but always works in hearts and minds and bodies and spirits and families and communities as we ask and make ourselves available. So when my resources are not adequate to the task as I see it, or when my prayers are not adequate to the situation, I trust that God is at work and that providence will surprise me. So I won't pretend that I don't want what I want, but I also won't cling to the outcome I have in mind as the only right answer. I cling to God, not what I want.

It isn't an easy thing to do, to have faith in God's goodness, what we used to call Providence, and I'm a slow learner. But I do the best I can. I want to sing you a song of faith. I've sung it before. It is a song that breaks my heart – not because I can say, "YES! THAT IS THE ANSWER!" but because it calls up the best in me. It doesn't solve anything but it helps me re-enter a state of faith.

It tells the story of Israel, in the wilderness, afraid that God won't provide for them. See if it speaks to you.

[song is by Noel Paul Stookey, "The Quail Came"]

We Are the Ones

Date: June 13, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

Today, our Old Testament lesson is the familiar story of David and Bathsheba. I think most of us know this tale of King David's passionate desire for his officer Uriah's wife. Most of us have probably taken it as a stern condemnation of lust and adultery. In fact, though, I believe it cuts much more deeply than that.

Here's how the story unfolds, Only its conclusion is in today's reading, but it begins when King David sees his seductive neighbor Bathsheba taking a bath on her rooftop and is consumed with desire for her. Being king, he just simply sends for her and takes her to his bed. But she gets pregnant and this is a major problem because her husband Uriah has been away campaigning with David's army. So David calls Uriah home, assuming he will sleep with his wife and then think the baby is his. But Uriah won't break his military abstinence while his men are in battle. So David decides to do something much more drastic. He sends Uriah back to the front with orders that virtually guarantee that he will be killed straightaway. Uriah is killed and David marries Bathsheba. David, in short, stole Uriah's life and his wife just because he wanted to. Kings could do that!

At this point, Nathan, the court prophet, steps into the picture and tells King David a little parable. There were two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds; the poor man had only one small she-lamb. But when the rich man wanted to give a feast, he didn't kill one of his own sheep. He took the one from the poor man. Hearing this story, King David becomes outraged and responds that this is absolutely terrible. The rich man showed no compassion at all. David says he deserves death. And Nathan says, "You are the man." He even spells out for David the meaning of his parable. He says, in effect, "Look, David, you are a very rich man. You got everything that was King Saul's – his rule, his property, all his wives. But out of your greed, you have killed a man and taken what was his. You have thought only of yourself.

You see, lust and passion are not the main issues. It wasn't just adultery or murder that upset things. It was not just passion that broke the law. It was irresponsible passion. It was desire that put self first and simply ignored the needs and rights of others.

I don't want to say anything negative about passionate living. I believe that living with zest and verve and passion is a big part of what real living is all about. I believe we should all live our lives with lots of passionate energy, and I believe being able to do this is one of the most wonderful gifts of the Spirit. But passionate living goes tragically astray when it is so greedy and lustful that it ignores the needs of others and focuses only on self-gratification. That kind of energy diminishes a full, rich life and turns it into a story of selfish exploitation.

Now all this may sound perfectly obvious, but, in fact, I think it is far from obvious in our world and in our time. We live in a society that is virtually centered on self-gratifying passion, on acquisition, on me-first. My great-grandfather, the German patriarch of a large family in Pittsburgh, is said to have had a rule when pie was served at the family table. He would say, "First comes me, then comes me again – then comes you." I grew up thinking that family story was sort of cute, but, you know, it wasn't. It is getting to be the way of too many of us. And if we all think and act like that sort of German patriarch, life will certainly not be cute. It will be desperate and fearsome.

I fear very much that we have become a fundamentally destructive society. Our basic rule in these United States and in much of the modern world seems increasingly to be, "if I want it, I should have it. So, whether it is lust for oil abroad or for a high definition TV at home, we – our government, our corporations, and masses of our people – expend our power and our money way beyond our means as a way of life. We want; we want; we want. And all too often we want what we want, regardless of what that means to anyone else. David and Bathsheba and Uriah. It all produces a sort of frenzy of acquiring, of give me what I want and the devil take the hindmost. A person I know once told me, "There's one thing I have learned in life – the big fish eat the little fish. David and Bathsheba and Uriah.

Ah, Nathan, we need you today! We need you to point your finger at us all and tell us, "You are the ones." We have all too often gotten passionate living all wrong. We have allowed lust and greed and willfulness to go rogue. We need to hear the story of David and Bathsheba, or Uriah and Nathan, because we need to know, down deep, that passion gone right is com-*passion*. We are all in this life together, and the great and true mystery is that our lives don't really grow richer by what we get, but by what we give.

And, so with our gospel story today – the hauntingly lovely tale of the sinner, doubtless a prostitute, who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment and her tears. She didn't have much in her life and she lived in a far from ideal way, but she loved much. And Jesus held her up before the well-to-do-and-oh-so-proper Pharisee, Simon, as an example of how to live. Not her profession and not her social graces – Simon was surely way ahead of her in these sorts of things – but her compassion. She is forgiven, because she loved much.

Friends, there is the key to a truly passionate life. Invest yourself in this world, not just your money. Reach out. Open up. Give 'till it hurts. Don't grasp for gain at someone else's cost, as though you were some oil company writ small. You will be going against the grain of our culture, but our culture is deeply wrong. You will be somewhat "un-American" but you will be in harmony with what life is really all about. Do you believe that? It is pure faith to believe that. But if you do believe it, and if you try to live it out, then like the prostitute who wiped Jesus' feet with her tears you will go in peace because your faith will have made you whole. Amen.

One Year at Canterbury Site

Date: June 20, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 65:1-9

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, "Here I am, here I am,"

to a nation that did not call on my name.

I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,

who walk in a way that is not good,

following their own devices;

a people who provoke me

to my face continually,

sacrificing in gardens

and offering incense on bricks;

who sit inside tombs,

and spend the night in secret places;

who eat swine's flesh,

with broth of abominable things in their vessels;

who say, "Keep to yourself,

do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."

These are a smoke in my nostrils,

a fire that burns all day long.

See, it is written before me:

I will not keep silent, but I will repay;

I will indeed repay into their laps

their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together,

says the LORD;

because they offered incense on the mountains

and reviled me on the hills,

I will measure into their laps

full payment for their actions.

Thus says the LORD:

As the wine is found in the cluster,

and they say, "Do not destroy it,

for there is a blessing in it,"

so I will do for my servants' sake,

and not destroy them all.

I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,

and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall settle there.

Psalm 22:18-27 Page 611, BCP

New Testament Lesson: Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Gospel: Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Sermon

Happy Father's Day, for all the worry and joy and love that means. Today is Father's Day, and it is also something special for St. John's.

One hundred twenty-one years ago today, claiming the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, families gathered in a living room on Depot Hill in a summer-only community called Camp Capitola to have Sunday School and Morning Prayer. In subsequent weeks and months they kept meeting, and had Communion when a priest could be found. Their dream, and their foundations led to what we are today, and in the past decade we've been laying foundations in ministry and in a new campus, for generations to come. Clearly they wanted the Gospel of Christ to touch the lives of their children and their community, even at a summer resort. They participated in God's dream.

This morning we hear the trumpet-call of one of St. Paul's most quoted claims: "there is no longer slave nor free, woman or man, Jew nor Gentile, but we are all one in Christ Jesus." A new humanity united in the love of Christ is God's dream. Even in the fast-changing world of today, that is God's dream. Even in the very partisan world of today, where people don't listen to understand one another, our being one is still God's dream. And God means to make it a reality.

Someone reminded me recently of a lovely comment made about us a few years ago. A visiting parent said of St. John's that we were like the early church. This was from a person who doesn't like churches as a rule. The early church was pretty simple in its faith. Christ rose, they felt risen, renewed, forgiven, and began to encounter the harsh world around them with hope and faith. Slaves and outcasts, rich and poor, sick and healthy, Jews and converts from many faiths and no faith began to meet together, to know one another, to understand one another, to celebrate Holy Eucharist together as one, though their lives were very different.

What happens when someone who owns slaves begins to see things from the point of view of slaves who are also members, and sometimes leaders of a congregation? What happens when these people get home? What happens when people who have been suspicious of one another for always begin to know and understand one another as members of Christ's Body: Jews who lived carefully apart and Gentiles who were suspicious of them?

When they become friends and fellow-worshippers, how do their views change? The things they cherish remain cherished, but are seen in a new light also, the world grows richer, some inner conflicts are stirred up, and a chance to grow in grace and wisdom is introduced. This is part of the genius of God's dream: no slave, no free, no woman, no man, no Jew no Greek. No gay no straight, no woman no man, no immigrant no citizen, no well-off no bankrupt. It doesn't tell you what to do about the values, about the situations, about the laws. It does make the people real, so that the valuing is about real people, and the principles aren't discussed in a vacuum. And it means that the principles are discussed, can't be ignored, because they affect people we know, people we care about.

I think St. John's future relevance, our ability to carry the gospel to future generations, depends largely on the degree to which we weave the web of relationships between us, and between us and the world around us, in Jesus' Name and for Jesus' sake. We need to know people as the first step toward community, toward the common good, toward our being a sign and a vehicle of the gospel.

Now this is a morning to bask in the wonder of the journey by which God has brought us to this point. Today is an ebenezer, "hither, by God's help, we've come." And what I'd like us to do, right now, practicing this weaving together in a tiny way, a way just for today, is to talk a little. Shortly we are going to have prayers of Thanksgiving for a Church, just as we did when we consecrated this place. That thanksgiving is not just for a building, but for a people who belong to God in Christ, a people fashioned by 121 years together. Some of us are new to St. John's and some have been here all your lives, but we all stand in that heritage, and it is a heritage that goes back to Christ, and to Moses, and to Abraham.

Yet we each have our own cherished values and point of view. I invite you to think about what it is that you value most in the gospel of Christ, in the life of this parish. If you were the one writing the prayer of thanksgiving, what would you put in it? For what, in Christ and the Church are you grateful at your core?

And my request is that you turn to a neighbor, here this morning in worship, and share that thought, or if it is too personal, some simpler thanksgiving, and then ask them what their gratitude is as well. I'm just asking for two minutes. One for you to share, one for them to share. On this day of celebration, we'll say what we're grateful for. Take turns. Enrich one another.

Flesh vs. Spirit

Date: July 4, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalm 66:1-8

New Testament Lesson: Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16

[My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.]

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised-- only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule-- peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Gospel: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Sermon

We hear Jesus send the disciples out, seventy of them, which is a symbolic number, and means enough for all the nations, that the gospel will eventually be for all peoples. He sends them to take God's peace to all and invite them to live in the presence of God, to live at peace with one another, or in the words Jesus uses in Luke's gospel (4:18-19), the words of Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / Because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, / He has sent to proclaim release to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind, / To set at liberty those who are oppressed / To proclaim the year of God's Jubilee.

You can see why many would be opposed, and not receive this message of peace. This threatens any exploitive way of life, and most of us have something to protect. At first God's ways seem only to restrict us from seeking our own advantage and perhaps we don't see the love and grace and justice that will heal our hearts and minds. So Jesus, in sending the disciples out, knew that some would respect and welcome their message, and some would reject them, and who knows? I think part of his motivation was to show them the power of the gospel to free some, and the reality of rejection by others, so that they could become mature disciples and find their peace in God's Spirit and not in the approval of others.

Galatians is all about how revealing this grace of God is, separating fact from fiction, integrity from hypocrisy. It does this under the metaphor of FLESH vs. SPIRIT, and, if we understand it, that can be very helpful, so let's follow Paul's examples:

Restore the sinful - you stand in the same grace, and if you think you are better you aren't standing in the grace! So watch your own contribution, how you serve the gospel, and not how the other guy does. If you are playing both sides of the fence, trying to succeed big for the sake of your godless desires AND to please God, you won't fool God. (FLESH VS SPIRIT is just saying what "pride goes before a fall" says: trusting in visible stuff, whether circumcision so you'll be accepted, or being fit and tanned, or making your home or your car a showplace, or having advanced degrees or professions just so that you can show them off and be honored, or trusting your accumulated net worth as your salvation, or anything else that takes you away from relying on the walk with God as your real net worth, your real status, your real hope and salvation, your real health and strength.) The way you love you = sowing to the flesh. The way God loves you? Sow to the Spirit. Learning the distinction doesn't come in one flash, but incrementally.

Another way of saying it is that loving ourselves, without God's love as our foundation, is both exhausting, because it cannot be enough, and hostile, because in our desperation we put ourselves before others and misunderstand them and compete when there is no need. We end up worn out, disappointed, and hurting the ones we meant to bless. It might be better to paraphrase this as SELF vs. Spirit, and to see that it isn't that God wants us to leave flesh behind, to leave self behind, but that self cannot find its fulfillment without walking with God. Self and Spirit.

This goes for nations, too. Insofar as we are faithful to God's calling, we will be more secure. Insofar as we forget God we will be full of ourselves and in danger of a great fall. And when we trust God, when we are in Christ, there is a new humanity, a new creation, this is glory, we live in gratitude, live not only for ourselves, but for Christ and those he loves, and so we are devoted to restoring the sinner, working for the common good, opposing the lawless and the unjust, and serving well the nation to which we were born, or in which we were naturalized, and also being constructive and devoted to the well-being of that city and nation in which we dwell.

In patriotism as in all things, we must guard that we are walking with Christ, his purposes above our advantage, our hope in God and not ourselves. I think the Prayer Book catches the spirit of this beautifully, and I ask you to pray it with me, and ask God to make us citizens, in this way, of heaven, and because we put citizenship in God's realm first, good citizens of this nation, or good sojourners in it. Turn with me to page 820 in your Prayer Book.

18. For our Country (See also Various Occasions no. 17)

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage: We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It isn't that God is opposed to "flesh" (which really just means "self-seeking"). It is that "flesh" is opposed to God. The desires of each individual self can only be fulfilled by a deep and devoted cooperation with God, for which we were created. God desires this fulfillment for us. God wants our selves to be fully developed and enjoyed, but this can only happen in cooperation with the divine. Jesus said, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly." So self can be at war with God, or self can be "in cahoots" with God. Guess which one works better?

How Can a Samaritan Be Good?

Date: July 11, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Moses said to the people of Israel, "The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

"Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

Psalm 25:1-10 Page 614, BCP

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
3 Show me your ways, O LORD, *
and teach me your paths.
4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.
5 Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.
6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *

remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.
7 Gracious and upright is the LORD; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.
9 All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

New Testament Lesson: Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Gospel: Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he

saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Sermon

A friend of mine summed up this passage from Colossians with this chorus: "We've been delivered from the dominion of darkness, into the kingdom of light." I think today's gospel illuminates exactly what that looks like, in a most remarkable parable.

This lawyer, this expert in the law of Moses asks Jesus, in order "to test him", "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We are given to understand that this is insincere, an attempt to discredit Jesus. But what seems awfully interesting to me is that Jesus doesn't treat him like an adversary, but like a person searching for understanding and salvation. So he asks the man "you are an expert in the law, what do you think is the best answer to your question? Asks him to risk something himself, to have a little skin in the game. And Jesus likes his answer, as far as it goes, and tosses it right back with a challenge, asking the scholar if he is prepared to live this answer. And suddenly the scholar wants to put on the brakes, to define carefully, to have boundaries, to limit his obligations under the law to something that is comfortable and well-defined. He's not only a student of the law with his mind, he's a legalist in his living, wanting an exact command, so that he knows where his obligations end.

How do I know this? Because I'm completely in sympathy with this guy. Jesus' challenge frightens me. What leap of faith does he want from me? How far does he want my sympathies to go? How far does he want my kindness to go? When can I stop? Do I ever get to rest? If Jesus is going to challenge me to live my values well, how do I balance that with the command to keep the Sabbath and have rest and balance in my life? How do I balance it with the desire to provide for my family's future? Does this make sense to you?

But when I'm still putting the question like this, I haven't caught how far ahead of me Jesus is, and how different his perspective than mine. And to break open the question, as usual, to wake us to God's vision, Jesus tells a story.

Now there are emotional realities, political realities, in this story, that I don't think we begin to realize, and that background looms very large in the way Jesus tells the parable. First, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a very dangerous road to travel in those days and everybody knew it. Second, Jews and Samaritans, as a rule, despised one another in Jesus' day, and this had religious and political roots; and the lawyer, who is trying to publically discredit Jesus, does so as a member of a powerful party, and those of his party despise Samaritans as political and religious traitors, so it is very provocative of Jesus

to tell a story with a Samaritan as a good guy and then ask the lawyer to name him as the good example, as one the lawyer himself should emulate, in going beyond the demands of the law, since the lawyer himself has just called loving God and neighbor the heart of the law, the key to salvation.

So Jesus takes this scholar seriously, as a seeker, not an opponent, and tells him a story. Let me try to do the same:

One day one of us from St. John's decided to take a long walk after church, from St. John's to the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. It might have been me, because I'm walking a lot these days, or it might have been Chris . . . And when he got down to beach flats, he was mugged, and beaten, and left on the street for dead. Now a priest was driving by, and he saw the guy, and decided he was probably just sleeping something off and kept going. And a member of the vestry of a church drove by, and saw the guy lying there, but thinking what a dangerous neighborhood it was he just kept going. Somebody would make the call.

And then a family of illegal immigrants walked by. They weren't rich, they were staying at one of the motels in the neighborhood, they didn't know much about the area, they were on their way to the Boardwalk. But they did know something about people lying by the road, and when they saw this guy, they had pity on him. At home in Iraq, they had seen lots of people lying by the side of the road. So they found someone who would call an ambulance, and they waited with him until it came, even though they were now very afraid of the neighborhood, and even though they didn't want to be questioned, because they didn't want to leave him alone.

Now, was it the priest, the vestry member, or the immigrant family? Who acted as a neighbor?

Jesus is asking the lawyer whether the priest and the vestry member were justified to pass by – because the law said they should keep undefiled for their duties. They had an out. And, Jesus is asking whether a member of a despised minority can, by virtue of simple human solidarity, be a good example to a fine upstanding citizen like this scholar of the law of Moses.

It would have been very difficult for the lawyer, with his cronies standing around hoping he could discredit Jesus, so it's very courageous for him to have answered the way he did. The law justified the first two, and Jesus was showing him that his answer, the law of love, went way beyond the Moses' demands.

To his credit, the lawyer stuck to his convictions and said the one who showed mercy was the real neighbor.

Jesus showed him that eternal life requires not only definitions, but actions, and that those actions often come in the guise of foreigners, outcasts, enemies, and people who confuse us because they won't fit our picture of what is good or familiar or safe.

Colossians says that, in Jesus, God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light. Sometimes that light is too bright for us. Sometimes it seems blinding, and we look for definitions

to dim it, to narrow it, to make it tolerable. I think St. Paul would tell us – and we know Jesus constantly tells us – that we should instead, stay in the light

and let our eyes adjust,
let our hearts adjust,
let our minds adjust,
until we can see clearly,
in the blinding, joyful light of his forgiveness –
see how we are free now
to view others
with the eyes of love.

Proper 11 Year C

Date: July 18, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Gen. 18:1-10a, Col 1:15-28, Lk 10:38-42

Sermon

Martha and Mary. We've heard this story so often we think we know these two. The martyr and the Spirit-filled disciple. The worrywart and the serene devotee. The resentful and the blissed-out sisters. Frankly, I'm tired of it, maybe because my inner Martha bears a grudge; because she fears being shortchanged for all eternity. It's enough to give altar guilds and hospitality committees a bad rap. Of course, sermons on these short five verses from Luke hasten to point out that we're all a little bit of each; that even those whose gaze is fixed on Jesus can also make

sandwiches for Habitat for Humanity, or even Jesus himself, should the need arise. And those whose ministry is more active than contemplative can have a prayer life, too.

And yet, I think that typecasting Martha and Mary sells each of them short. They are, in fact, each more interesting women than their stereotypes suggest. Take Martha. Since the death of her brother Lazarus she's been a single woman running a household. For a Jewish woman of the first century, this is the sign of a tragedy. It means she's either a widow, or never married; it also means that she has virtually no position in society. Her situation was generally seen as a sign of God's displeasure. She was expected to be as invisible as possible, and to cling quietly to what little their culture offered them.

When Jesus stops by their village on his way to the cross, Martha does the unthinkable by inviting him and his entourage to her house. In receiving Jesus into her home, Martha is, in her own way, selling everything, including her reputation, for a pearl of great price. It is a bold and reckless action that struck at convention, ignored propriety, and was totally scandalous. She saw an opportunity of great value, and went for it, ignoring all that stood in the way. Her actions were both courageous and, in the context, a little bizarre. No doubt, tongues were wagging.

Jesus enters the house and begins to teach. The Greek makes it clear that he is not chatting about the weather – this is his word, the content of his message. Now Mary enters the picture. She has seen what her sister has been willing to do in asking the rabbi to come to their house. It's Martha who has made clear the importance of his visit. Now Mary has an opportunity to make a similar choice. Another thing women didn't do in first century Jewish culture was to sit down with the menfolk and have a conversation. Or sit down with the menfolk, period. For a woman to be taught by a rabbi was simply not done. Here are two contemporary rabbinic statements on the matter: "It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman", and "It is better to teach a daughter to be a prostitute than to teach her the Torah".

For a woman to listen to someone teach about the Torah was simply wrong. But Mary had been watching her sister, and had discovered in Jesus the same power, the same draw, that Martha had. So she sat down and began to listen to Jesus, a bold and reckless action that struck at convention, ignored propriety, and was totally scandalous. Her action is courageous, and a little bizarre. No doubt, tongues would wag.

Now we see these two for who they were: interesting, gutsy women who were very much alike, and who were willing to risk much for an opportunity to be with Jesus. Already marginalized by society as women alone, they were willing to give up the last shred of propriety, of societal acceptance, to spend time with Jesus. Now Martha's complaint looks a little different. She has

already risked so much for this visit. And NOW Mary won't help make sandwiches. Martha must have been near tears – it must look to her as though she has spent everything she has for the pearl of great price, and now will be denied the teaching, the presence of the Holy One. It really isn't fair. And yet...

Mary is simply doing what her sister has modeled. Jesus rebukes Martha, but gently. He tells her, in effect, to have the courage of her convictions, to follow through where she has begun. He is asking her not to make herself a second-class citizen of the Kingdom, but to take the place she has already claimed at his feet.

The real issue here is not who does the dishes. The real issue is the meaning of Jesus and the consequences of his presence. The presence of Christ changes things. Once he's in the house, things will need to be re-evaluated and restructured. When Jesus arrives, the old rules and patterns won't work. It may be inconvenient. That was Martha's mistake. She simply assumed that she could invite Jesus into her house, into her life, and then return to business as usual. Or at least she wanted to be in control of what changed and what didn't.

Jesus was telling Martha – and us – that it doesn't work that way. Once Jesus is invited in, then sooner or later all of life will be different. To demand otherwise is to misunderstand God. God does not fit into a world and a life that is already pretty well constructed. Jesus is not a missing piece in an otherwise well-constructed existence. Life changes when Jesus is invited in, and that's the real key to this story.

He asks us to give up, not only the expectation that others must help us make the cosmic lunch, but the idea that our agenda is necessarily valid at all. And that's not so easy. Yet we know that God works with and through our gifts. For Both Mary and Martha had the spiritual gift of faithful discipleship. Martha, like most of us, just needed a little persuading.

Several weeks ago, some of us took part in a Spiritual Gifts workshop, a most illuminating experience. The parable of Martha and Mary invites us to do a similar thing. In thinking of these two women as real people, and not just types, we're invited to listen to their story – their courage and audacity, their strengths and weaknesses, and try them on for size. What is the spiritual gift that God is pushing you to make use of?

Where is that pearl of great price in each of our own lives, and what's the price tag?

Remember: when Jesus is invited in, things change.

Meditation on Relationships

Date: July 25, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Gen. 18:20-33, Col. 2:6-15, Lk. 11:1-13

Sermon

When David and I went to the Jewish film Festival in San Francisco we saw a documentary called “Jenny and Jenny”. This film, directed by the cousin of a friend of ours, in Hebrew, followed the lives of two seventeen-year-old cousins for all of one summer. These girls are best friends. They tell each other all their secrets, they write notes to each other in class, they have terrible quarrels, vow never to speak to each other again, and are best friends again the next day. Their families are quite different. The father of one Jenny is almost too protective – the bane of her existence! He won’t let her go out unless she’s decently dressed, makes her keep a curfew, has to review her dates. The other Jenny is the oldest of four daughters. Several years ago, their father deserted them and went to the U.S., where he currently has a job in Las Vegas. But she won’t let him be. She calls him collect, tells him all about her life, asks when he’s coming home. Finally she lets him have it. “How could you have left and not even said goodbye to me?” She will not let him out of the relationship. Today’s readings are also all about relationships.

Abraham is also in relationship to God his father. At first, it seems as though this passage is about Abraham trying to change God’s mind. But, in fact, neither Abraham nor we had any idea what God was planning to do. It’s more as though Abraham is trying to find out what God has in mind, and maybe to be a little persuasive as well. He is not asking for himself, or for his family, that they might be spared from destruction, but because he feels the situation is unjust. He wrestles with what he fears to be God’s unfairness until he gets an answer he’s satisfied with.

Now, God is in relationship with Abraham. God has made a covenant with Abraham, that his descendants will be as many as the stars of heaven. But for Abraham to really be in relationship with God, he has to have this argument. After all, we don’t know that God was planning to be unfair to the righteous of Sodom, or even if there were any who were righteous. This is Abraham’s struggle, not God’s.

And so it is with us. Two ways of looking at difficult or challenging situations.

Be faithful, don’t ask questions, and obey the Will of God.

Be faithful, assume that, as a child of God, anything is possible, and proceed, doing the best you can.

Both of these are flawed, they are not real relationships. To be in relationship with someone, we need to be real with them, and that means letting all the warts show. It's not that God is unfamiliar with these less-than-attractive parts of us; it's that we can't work through our own sinfulness unless we bring it to God and wrestle with it. It's for us, not for God's self-improvement.

The passage from Colossians takes this idea and translates it into a Christian context. It says that to be in relationship with God is to live in Christ, to be rooted and built up in Jesus. To live in Christ is a defense against all those things that would draw us away from being in authentic relationship with God. What are these things? The Letter to the Colossians mentions "philosophy and empty deceit". We might call it the empty life or the black hole of the false self. Buddhists might call it the world of illusion. Living in Christ brings us back to the true self, the you and me that is in relationship with God, with self, with neighbor.

When Jesus' disciples ask him how to pray, they are asking for a tool to use to bring them back into that right relationship. Thomas Merton said that praying the Lord's Prayer is "like swimming in the heart of the sun". It's a metaphor that suggests that we are surrounded by God.

You know, we often think that prayer is a way of "getting to" God, as though God were "up there" or "out there", and we're down here. We forget that God cares for us like a mother cares for a newborn child. That baby is never out of her mind. We forget that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. We are like the little fish who swam to its mother and said, "Mommy, they were talking about this thing called 'water' today in school. I swam all around looking for it, from the bottom of the ocean to the place where the land meets the sea. But I couldn't find it! What is this thing called 'water'? We want to know, "What is this thing called 'God'?", not realizing that we are already in God.

The prayer that Jesus taught the disciples was not just a teaching tool; it was his own prayer. When we pray it, it is not just we who pray, but Jesus praying in us. It is all Christians who came before us and who will come after us, praying together. It is, above all, a prayer of relationship. In it is represented Jesus' relationship to God the Father, our relationship to God through Jesus, and our connectedness, one to another.

One of the few words I recognized in the movie, "Jenny and Jenny" was the word "Abba", "Father". We forget how revolutionary it was for Jesus to address God Almighty as "Daddy". Jewish tradition thought of God as a father figure, but a transcendent, somewhat distant one. The word Abba is Aramaic, the language that Jesus used, and it was taken over into Hebrew,

and still used today. Now lots of people have trouble with the idea of God as father. Feminists, for example, or anyone whose relationship with their human father may not have been ideal. Since it is beyond the power of any of us to grasp what God is really like, we tend to use the images we have at hand, like our own parents. But, of course, God is no more like our own parents than God is exclusively male. If you have had trouble with the word, "Father", give it another try, and let your image of human fathers be conditioned by your image of a loving God, not the other way around.

What does it mean when we say, "your kingdom come"? Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to heaven is heaven". To live in anticipation of that kingdom is to be a keeper of the Dream, to remember that you are the beloved of God, called to love others. Like Jesus, keepers of the Dream live in the present moment, accepting what it brings them, surrendering to the unexpected and unknown. And yet, in our daily lives it can be tough to grasp just what God's kingdom of justice, love and peace looks like. It's a little like learning to float, if anyone can remember back that far. The harder you try, the less successful you are. In fact, your need to be in charge of floating is your greatest obstacle. Floating requires trust and surrender.

When we ask God for our daily bread, we are not just asking for daily sustenance. We are opening ourselves to God in utter poverty, realizing that nothing we have, our gifts, our talents, our friends, our personality, our very lives, comes from us. The more we progress in the spiritual life, the less self sufficient we realize we are, until we are able to come before God as we truly are, utterly dependent. To pray, "give us this day our daily bread" is to recognize the grace, goodness, and generosity of God working in and through our lives.

When we think of daily bread, we think not only of fresh, hot, fragrant, home-baked, life-sustaining bread, fresh from the oven, but also of God's self offered for us in the bread of Eucharist. The more that self-offering becomes part of our daily consciousness, the more we are able to offer ourselves as broken bread for the life of the world. It is a consequence of relationship to become what you receive. The "amen" you say at the altar rail when you receive communion is an assent. It's as though you're saying, "Yes! I accept the challenge to be daily bread for the hungry people I know and those I don't know". It is not a challenge to be taken lightly.

When we ask God's forgiveness, "as we forgive those who trespass against us", we're not presenting God with an argument as to why we should be forgiven. ("Well, I forgave that schmuck!"). We are, rather, stating the prerequisite for our getting the message. Forgiveness and repentance are intimately related. Just as we can't understand being forgiven until we've repented; if we don't forgive others, we can't see our own sinfulness, and so we can't open the door to God's forgiveness. Think of a time when somebody did you wrong, and you held on to that mistreatment for dear life, for years. You fed it, and nursed it, and all it ever did for you

was to harden your heart, not only against the wrongdoer, but against yourself as well. “No justice; no peace!” To forgive a long-held grudge is to rejoin the human race. But sometimes, it’s not that easy. The hurt is grievous, the wrong seems monstrous. Then we can say, “Jesus, I cannot forgive this person. Give me your forgiveness.”

Some of you may know the writing of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutchwoman who, with her sister Betsy, gave shelter to Jews during World War II in Amsterdam. For this they were captured and sent to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp where Betsy died. After the war, Corrie, a woman of deep personal faith, wrote and lectured about her experiences, especially about transformative suffering and grace in the midst of horror. After one lecture, a man approached her to thank her for her witness. As he described how much her words had meant to him, she looked at his face, right into the eyes of one of the Nazi guards at Ravensbruck. As he held out his hand to her, she found she could not, of her own will, raise her hand to shake his. As she stood, dumbstruck, she prayed, “Jesus, I cannot forgive this person. Give me your forgiveness.” As she did, she felt her hand rise to meet his, and was able to say wholeheartedly, “I forgive you”.

When we ask to be saved from the time of trial, we’re really asking God to keep us out of trouble. Temptations, after all, crop up all the time. What we want is to not be seduced by the power of evil (and evil is always seductive!). For many of us, seduction takes the form of idolatry. What golden calves do each of us bow down and worship? Albert Haase, a Franciscan writer, speaks of “the 8 p’s: power, prestige, people, possessions, productivity, popularity, pleasure, and position.” I can think of several on that list that are my personal favorites! Will power is not enough to be freed of these temptations; they’re like addictions in that way. The key lies in the realization that things are not what they seem to be, and in turning the management over to God. Possessions, power, prestige? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” Pleasures, people, popularity? “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”. Productivity and position? “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Simple, right? But not easy.

When Jesus talks about perseverance in prayer, it’s not so that we might change God’s mind. The struggle is not with God, but with us. In prayer, we are asking God to help us overcome our own pride, or selfishness, or fear, or indifference, or to make sense of what we don’t understand. The point is that we aren’t left to figure it out by ourselves. In the words of Thomas Merton,

“Let Jesus pray. Thank God Jesus is praying. Forget yourself. Enter into the prayer of Jesus. Let him pray in you...The best way to pray is, stop. Let prayer pray within you... In the end, praise praises. Thanksgiving gives thanks. Jesus prays.

All Is Vanity, Unless...

Date: August 1, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Psalm 49:1-11 Page 652, BCP

1 Hear this, all you peoples; hearken, all you who dwell in the world, *
you of high degree and low, rich and poor together.

2 My mouth shall speak of wisdom, *
and my heart shall meditate on understanding.

3 I will incline my ear to a proverb *
and set forth my riddle upon the harp.

4 Why should I be afraid in evil days, *
when the wickedness of those at my heels surrounds me,

5 The wickedness of those who put their trust in their goods, *
and boast of their great riches?

6 We can never ransom ourselves, *

or deliver to God the price of our life;
7 For the ransom of our life is so great, *
that we should never have enough to pay it,
8 In order to live for ever and ever, *
and never see the grave.
9 For we see that the wise die also;
like the dull and stupid they perish *
and leave their wealth to those who come after them.
10 Their graves shall be their homes for ever,
their dwelling places from generation to generation, *
though they call the lands after their own names.
11 Even though honored, they cannot live for ever; *
they are like the beasts that perish.

New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Gospel: Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Sermon

Ecclesiastes, the teacher, Koheleth, talks about vanity, emptiness, futility. Colossians talks about idolatry. Both talk about what does not satisfy the human heart, or delight the heart of God. Idolatries are the false paths that lead to what Koheleth calls "vanity."

The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that material things don't satisfy, and that when one has toiled to learn knowledge and even wisdom there is still no satisfaction because even that doesn't last. For him death makes a mockery of it all, he yearns for a greater significance, and without assurance of it he is restless. "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." He has no sense of walking with a living God, and he disagrees completely with the author of Psalm 16 who says, "I will bless the Lord who gives me council, in the nighttime wisdom comes to me in my inward parts." He has a sense of walking with God, for which Koheleth yearns. What if your life is vanity?

Jesus' parable in Luke is in response to brothers feuding over an inheritance. Jesus doesn't help settle it at all. He tells a parable about the futility of trusting wealth – about a man who is sure his goods will satisfy him if he can just build his barns a little bigger, and this seems to be much worse than the discontent of Koheleth, the Teacher. For the first has a yearning that may lead him to God, the second is a contented with his idolatry. What if your life is just having more than others? Nothing must content our hearts in the end but the living God.

Colossians is also speaking of idolatry, of things that distract us from God, lead us astray from God, cause us to use other people instead of love them with the love of God. It speaks of the misuse of sex and longing, the misuse of anger, the violent tongue that fosters division, the half-truth that slanders another, the ill-will that festers in the dark until it finds an opportunity, the feeding and nurturing of greed. And Colossians says these are idolatry, they come between us and Christ, in whom we all are meant to be free and to be one. What if your life is just getting all you can at the expense of others?

Colossians wants us to understand, no other can take Jesus' place. Now I have heard a lot of people say that Jesus is essential in ways that are so violent, so uncaring, so exclusivist, that they almost make it a lie, because they misrepresent Jesus so. But when Colossians says that he is our salvation it doesn't mean that no one else is good, that there are no other great teachers, no saints in our faith or any other. It is no disrespect to the Buddha, or to the founder of Islam, or Moses or any other. It is just pointing us to walk with Jesus, the living Christ, in a way we cannot walk with anyone else. What if your life is walking with God, being a blessing, making God's love believable to those around you?

We say it in the Collect for Purity at the beginning of worship. We rejoice that God knows the secrets of our hearts – we often don't want to face them ourselves, but we are glad they don't frighten God, glad God knows from the inside what it means to be human. We are grateful that Jesus' life and death and resurrection amount to a massive acceptance of us in all our broken-ness and determination to restore us to wholeness. God loves us, as we are, but too much to just leave us stuck with the status quo.

We want God to breathe the Spirit into us so that our prayers won't be half-hearted. We want God to restore what we were given in creation, for we were created, it says in Genesis chapter two, from the dust of the earth and the breath of God. We want that restored to us so our prayers won't be half-hearted, and so that our living can be so full of life and love that it is a song to God, that we honor God, that we magnify God's name. It is more than we dare to hope for, but it is God's aim.

And we know that we can only have this if we ask for it, if we decide to walk with God, again and again, and let God know us just as we are, again and again, and let the Spirit cleanse us again and again, so that God's purpose in creation is restored in the forgiveness and power of the risen Christ.

I'd like to sing you the collect for purity the way I hear it. Open your prayer books to the collect for purity, at the bottom of page 355k, and follow along. I've added some words. I hope it speaks to you.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open
All desires known, from you no secrets are hid
You do not flinch from the things we will not see
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
So our prayers won't be half-hearted
By the inspiration of your Holy Spirit
Not only dust, but breath of Holy God
When to us the Spirit came
Come into the lives of us by Jesus' Name.
Restore this dust of the earth
That we may perfectly love you
Through the life of You in us
And worthily magnify, we long to magnify,
That our praise and lives may bless your holy name.
Not only dust, but breath of Holy God
When to us the Spirit came
Come to cleanse our hearts when we claim Jesus' Name.
You promised we could ask,
what we would ask you'd give

Almighty God, we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Spectacles of Grace

Date: August 8, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

“Grace” is a word we hear often in church, and this is because it is so central to understanding Christian hope and faith. The word, grace, is not a word that we use in our everyday speech, but it was a commonplace in the day-to-day talk of people in biblical times. It appears frequently in our Eucharistic liturgy, and Paul often used it in his letters. What it refers to is God’s constant goodness to us. It signifies God’s love for us, God’s everlasting delight in us, God’s affirmation of us just as we are. Not because we are so good, but because God is so loving, so gracious.

In our gospel this morning, our Lord is talking about the end of time, and the coming of the messianic Kingdom. He says that it will be like a heavenly banquet, at which the master will trade places with the servants. The servants will sit at table feasting, and the master will serve them. This is a regular theme in the teaching of Jesus about the grace of God. The servants who are to be feasted by the master will not be given this wonderful treatment because they were especially righteous or especially pious or especially hard-working. They will be seated at the heavenly banquet because God loves them and wants them there.

You see, “grace” is a shorthand way of describing everything God is and does for us, especially God’s affirming us in our frail and broken human lives. Grace is God’s amazing gift to take us, right where we are, and to lead us closer to God’s image. Grace is God’s power in our lives to grow. But it is a paradoxical power. Grace does not make us better people by driving or bullying us into moral improvement. It works by God’s freely persuading us that we are loved just the way we are.

This is certainly not to say that God is necessarily satisfied with us, just as we are. Or to say that we are given license to revel in whatever brand of nastiness or selfishness or indifference that may characterize us today. What it does mean is that we can stand where we are and build on it toward something better, because we are not being condemned for what and who we are. We are not lost. It is God’s wonderful, amazing grace that tells us that we are loved, even when

we have faults and shortcomings. And it is that grace which sets in motion God's power to make us right.

Do you know the lovely story of Don Quixote? In Cervantes' classic early 17th century novel, Don Quixote is a very ridiculous parody of a "knight," trying to reestablish medieval knighthood long after its time. He sallies forth, mounted on a donkey with his mind full of chivalry, and is soon mistaking inns for castles, windmills for giants, and criminals on their way to punishment for victims of tyranny. At every turn, as he tries to right what he imagines as wrongs, he is defeated by harsh reality. All the people who behold him think he is nothing but a crazy fool.

But, for all his tilting at windmills, this silly man on his silly donkey does a wonderful thing. Don Quixote makes life better for someone. Someone for whom life, before he rode onto the scene, had been dreadful. Working in a small and tawdry tavern, in a small and tawdry town, is a disheveled and tawdry barmaid. She is not a good woman; in fact, everyone in the village knows her to be a very bad woman. Since they believe they know this, they treat her, accordingly, like a hopeless sinner. And, of course, since everyone treats her that way, she sees herself as a bad woman and she acts the part. Then Don Quixote rides into town, and he looks at her through the spectacles of his grace. What he sees is a splendid lady, and, much as he had called windmills giants, he calls her a fine and noble person. And do you know what follows? Once she is sure that he really means it – and he really does – then she begins to feel the power of his grace. And she is utterly transformed. She becomes what Don Quixote sees.

It is, of course, a version of the archetypical story of Beauty and the Beast. When the beautiful princess kisses the ugly beast, he is transformed into something beautiful. When this dreamer of a knight sees the deep-down beauty in the soul of a tawdry barmaid, she is transformed. Any of the gospel writers would nod in agreement, because Beauty and the Beast and Don Quixote are, you see, both versions of our Christian story. There is a beast in all of us, but the gospel good news is that – like Beauty's Beast – we are kissed by God. And it is transforming. There is a tawdry barmaid in all of us, but the gospel good news is that – like Don Quixote looking at the barmaid – we are looked upon by God with spectacles of grace. And it is transforming.

I am not saying that God is a fictional knight who charges windmills. God is just and knows precisely what our faults are. God wants us to be holy and God knows full well that, all too often, we are not. But, like the Don, God sees the world through spectacles of grace. Christ came to let us know that there is going to be a place for each of us at the heavenly banquet, where the master will serve us a feast, no matter how broken we are. We can throw away all of our straightjackets of self-hatred and our bonds of despair and our shackles of self-condemnation. Christ tells us we can be transformed by God's grace and that we have the power to become the sort of people we were always meant to be. We can change, not from

something bad to something good, but from something loved to something amazing. That is grace.

We don't earn grace; God gives it to us. But God asks a loving response to this loving acceptance. It is simple and straightforward. We too are to put on spectacles of grace. We too are to see in the other people in our lives not just their broken and sinful actions, but their God-given potential to become all that they were created to be. We too are to pour out onto our fellow human beings some of that wonderful, and perhaps seemingly foolish, affirmation. And if we do, we won't just be doing what Don Quixote did for a barmaid so long ago. We will be doing what our heavenly Father does for us every minute of every day.

Amen.

I Come to Bring Division

Date: August 15, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back-- those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Psalm 82 Page 705, BCP

New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-11

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Gospel: Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Sermon

You are a gifted people. And one of your gifts is the gospel of peace that gives you so much love from God – and through you, love to all humankind. So when Jesus says:

Do you think I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, . . . but division!

Do you wish he hadn't said it? The trouble was, it was happening all around him. He said it in great grief. Not because it was his purpose to bring division, but because rejection of the kingdom meant his followers would be divided from those who did not follow. His disciples stopped hating the Romans, stopped plotting revolution, stopped hating foreigners, started treating rich and poor alike, treated educated and uneducated alike, acted in all kinds of ways that people said were "turning the world upside down."

Christian values are subversive. They are not the values of the dominant culture, not of the people on the street, not of the Romans who lorded it over them, not of the Pharisees, not the Saducees, not the ruling council, not then, not now, and never in the centuries between. So the gospel of love brought division. Jesus wanted them to read the signs of the times, that war with Rome was coming, and they needed to learn the kingdom's ways, and learn them soon, or they'd be destroyed. None of the powers liked his communities of respect and love for all, good and bad, rich and poor, and all the powers cooperated to get rid of him.

We live with a lot of tension today, as Christians. These days popular culture is full of disrespect and hatred, whether for the Liberals, or Conservatives or Muslims or name-your-villain, it is becoming acceptable to speak so sharply, to cultivate satisfying zingers, at least among like-minded people. We are fostering culture wars, and if we don't read the signs of the times they will destroy our nation from the inside, and the international community as well.

In our time the calling may be to depart from the culture wars and advocate unity for humankind, by having in a principled way, a modicum of understanding, a modicum of mutual respect and a modicum of interest in the common good. But here's the rub: this may divide us from friends who desire to identify as partisans.

It may be time for us to believe and stand for those things that we care deeply about, but to do so in a way that is truly respectful of other's point of view. As I read the signs of the times, our nation is in danger by reason of its unreason; and by reason of the willingness of so many good people to promote ever-wider division over opinions, without every listening to (and using the heart and mind to consider) the convictions and experience of those who differ from us.

But even if you think that is so, it is very difficult to be different from the people of your own day. It is difficult to take this principled stand for respect while you still argue for the best outcomes. And today, I want to tell you the story of one who shows me what Jesus meant.

Thirty years ago and more I read several biographies of the German Pastor and Professor of Theology Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and most of his books. It is amazing to watch the development of the thought and the convictions and the actions of a major figure in such a terrible time.

Bonhoeffer is a glimpse of both the courage of one who spoke up and opposed the Nazis, and gave his life as a martyr. He illustrates how the third Reich paralyzed its citizens. He shows how difficult it was even for those who had vision and courage to discern what to do and to do it. Perhaps it speaks to how difficult it is in any time to truly see what is awry and how uncomfortable it can be to say what your peers don't want to hear.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 and grew up in Berlin. His family were aristocrats, his father a professor of neurology. His mother had strong views of character and, with her university education, educated her children at home. At seventeen Bonhoeffer started graduate studies in ministry, and at twenty-three he published his doctoral dissertation, an original work about what constituted a vibrant Christian community.

In 1930 he was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he heard Adam Clayton Powell preach social justice and made a life-long friend of Frank Fischer, who introduced him to the African-American church experience. He learned to love Black Gospel music. But soon, concerned at what was happening at home, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany. Immediately upon Hitler's installation as chancellor, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address denouncing him and was cut off the air.

As the Roman Church and the German Protestant Church were intimidated by the Nazis into submission and cooperation and waves of anti-Jewish legislation were passed, Bonhoeffer helped to organize the "Confessing Church" – a movement for a Christianity the Nazis could not control, and a key player in the resistance and in smuggling Jews out of Germany.

During these years he published *The Cost of Discipleship*, which many of you have read, also *Life Together* about what it means to form pastors in an underground, illegal seminary in a hostile society. Bonhoeffer began shuttle diplomacy between the resistance and international friends of the resistance in Europe and the U.S., carrying messages at a time when few could travel outside Germany. His activities in the resistance were eventually suspected, and he continued, while he could with his shuttle diplomacy. He was forbidden to teach and publish. He made trips to England, Switzerland, Sweden, to Norway, and especially met with English Bishop George Bell, a member of Parliament, urgently asking his friend's help for permission for Jews to emigrate to England and other nations from Germany.

Bonhoeffer was forbidden to teach, his seminary disbanded. He traveled around the north of Germany supervising his young pastors and their illegal underground churches. He was forbidden to publish, but he continued to write and his friends to preserve his writing and publish it outside Germany. He is

forbidden to speak in public at all. He became engaged, and a few months later was imprisoned. He continues to write theological essays, ethics and letters from prison to encourage the resistance and his family and they are smuggled out. His brother and two brothers-in-law are arrested, as their plot to kill Hitler has now come to light. Bonhoeffer has been in prison at Tangle, Prince-Albrect-Strasse, Buchenwald, and finally at the Flossenberg concentration camp. April 9th 1945 he and other key figures of the resistance are executed just weeks before the German surrender.

Through all this we have the record in his writings and his letters of how he wrestled with every choice, how difficult it was to feel unpatriotic, how difficult to differ from his countrymen about what was the right thing to do, how difficult to separate from the church of his upbringing even when they cooperated with the Nazis. In every instance he was beset by fear, of course, in that ruthless time, for himself and for those who would be implicated if he were discovered; but also by uncertainty, because people he loved, people he trusted, people who had been his mentors were going along with the Nazis, and he had to wonder if he were crazy to buck the tide, the spirit of his time.

I know that the Gospel's values make us different from the world around us, and that the difference is uncomfortable, but Bonhoeffer helps me to see that no one, no matter how courageous or brilliant can be faithful without an inner struggle. I wonder if Gospel values make you feel different from our culture, and if you struggle to be faithful when this happens? Hebrews encouraged us to "persevere in the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured" it all . . . It is for joy and love that God asks us to stand up and grow strong. Sometimes seeing someone like Bonhoeffer helps me glimpse what is otherwise hard for me to understand – the awesome maturity of Jesus – and realize I have a role to play for the sake of the love that has been given to me, and the people God has given me to love.

Pentecost 13, Year C

Date: September 5, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Readings

Dt. 30:15-20, Phil. 1-20, Lk. 14:25-33

Sermon

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a small town in what is now western Turkey, there lived a family. This family, a father, mother, and an almost-grown son, were people of some means. And as people of substance did in those days, they owned slaves. One of these was a young man whose job it was to be the son's companion, or paedagogos. A little older than his charge, he accompanied the boy to school, to the gymnasium, to social events. He was not a tutor of academic subjects so much as a teacher of life; of the ways of the world. In fact, the two had grown up together.

The life of this family was to change forever when they came under the influence of a new teaching that was gaining converts throughout Asia Minor. It was simply called "the Way". However it happened, someone in the household caught the spark of faith from another Christian. They were persuaded, and the father and mother and all the household were baptized.

Because their house was large, the community of followers met there for worship. They became connected to Christians in other places through letters and traveling evangelists, including the great teacher who preached all over the known world about Jesus Christ, starting communities and writing letters of encouragement to the faithful. At the time of their conversion his letters were written from prison, part of the high cost of discipleship at that time.

As often happens, the conversion of some affected different members of the household in different ways. The slave, whose charge was now almost grown, was undecided. Certain things about this teaching made him want to be a part of it. But then...things in the household had never been exactly perfect. His job there was almost finished, and what had he to look forward to? Besides, if all were set free in Christ, how was it that he was a slave and they his owners? He wasn't sure it made sense. He weighed his options. Freedom was possible, but only at the risk

of terrible cost. The customary punishment for a runaway slave was death. Nevertheless, one day he packed his few belongings and left the house.

He went to the one place he might find support, and an answer to his questions; a place where he would also be under the watchful eye of the authorities who could turn him in at any moment. He went to the greatest Roman city in Asia Minor; to Ephesus, where Paul, the teacher, was bound in prison. At this time, about the year 62, Christianity was still an illegitimate religion. Those who refused to sacrifice to the gods of Rome, and those who sought converts, were imprisoned.

Onesimus was received and accepted. Under Paul's direction he became a true Christian. In time he became the teacher's helper, secretary, and messenger. It also became clear to the converted runaway that he had to return. But Paul, unable to travel himself, didn't want to lose his assistant. So, as he could not plead the cause of the runaway in person, he did the next best thing. He wrote a letter. It is a masterpiece of persuasive prose. In it, Paul asks the owner, Philemon, not only for his slave's freedom, but that he, Onesimus, might be returned to continue his work with Paul.

Onesimus, in Greek, means useful. Paul's letter plays on this, saying that the slave was useless to Philemon, but now, reborn as a Christian, he has become Onesimus to Paul and Philemon both. He asks for this emancipation as a voluntary good deed on the basis of love, saying that he has become Onesimus' father in prison; that he, Paul is old and suffering for his faith. He argues that with his freedom, the ex-slave will become more than a slave to his owner - he will become a beloved brother in Christ.

Who could refuse? Yet we have no proof of what happened. Scripture gives us only this bare bones account, and leaves us with a question. All the other letters of Paul are public letters of instruction and admonition to churches. This is a personal letter, asking only a personal favor. There has never been much doubt that it came from the hand of Paul - but what 's it doing in the canon of Scripture?

Here comes the exciting part. Some 40 years after Paul's death, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was transported from Syria to Rome under armed guard to be imprisoned and martyred for his faith. As he traveled through Asia Minor, all the churches sent representatives to meet him along the way, to support and encourage him. The delegation from Ephesus was led by their bishop, a man named Onesimus. After his departure, Ignatius wrote a letter to the Ephesian bishop, asking that two members of their delegation be sent to him in prison, to stay with him and act as his helpers. Ignatius saw himself as the spiritual descendant of St. Paul. In his letter to the bishop Onesimus, he uses the same play on words, the same phrases, the same arguments that Paul used in his letter to Philemon. How could Ignatius have known that letter?

Unless...unless our Onesimus, the slave, was indeed set free to return to Paul. Unless he stayed with Paul until his death. One might have expected those who worked with Paul to rise to positions of stature in the Christian community as living links with the apostolic church. Paul knew a man of ability when he saw one. Why else would he have been so eager to keep Onesimus with him? Such a one might well have become bishop. Someone had to have kept and collected all the letters of Paul. Who better than his friend, his pupil, his son in Christ, the bishop of Ephesus? Who, as secretary, carefully kept copies of all Paul's letters, who, as bishop, had them copied and bound together for circulation, including for all posterity the document that symbolized his own freedom in Christ, his letter of manumission.

Had these letters not been kept and collected, there might have been no New Testament. There would have been no substantial body of material for Marcion to take, half a century later, and gather together with other documents to make the beginning of that which forms the canon of our faith.

A lot of Christians don't know that the letter to Philemon exists. And yet this brief epistle, almost forgotten, hiding between Titus and Hebrews, may canonically be one of the most important in the new Testament. Not only that, but in a later age, it was used as scriptural justification for the abolition of slavery. What connection does this story have with the difficult passage in the Gospel about the cost of discipleship? Only this.

The slave Onesimus was willing, not only to give up all his possessions, but to pay the price of his life to be Christ's disciple. His decision brought abundant life - to him, and to countless other Christians who have come after him. "Choose life", says the Deuteronomist. By his willingness to face death, Onesimus chose the gift of eternal life, a gift that God's grace has multiplied over the centuries many times more than a hundredfold.

When we count up the cost of a radical decision that may change our lives, our family relationships, our future, it may seem that we cannot possibly pay the price. This tower is much too high; this war cannot be won on our own. And yet, that is the fabulous paradox of grace. Once we are willing to give up everything and know that it is still not enough, that's when grace comes to sustain us, along with the knowledge that our debt has already been paid, once for all.

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, that you and your descendants may live."

A Cantaloupe Remembered

Date: September 19, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

A short time ago, I had a piece of cantaloupe at breakfast. It was yellow and juicy looking, but it was somewhat disappointing to eat. I guess it was not fully ripe, and it didn't have much flavor. In a sense, it didn't really seem like a cantaloupe, even though it reminded me of a cantaloupe, and, perhaps, that was my problem.

It reminded me of the very best piece of cantaloupe that I have ever eaten. It was back in 1951, almost 60 years ago! I was a sailor in the U. S. Navy and I had just landed, for the first time, in the Philippines. Of course, I had no idea then that I would be returning to that country again and again, for much of my adult life, as a missionary for a number of years and as an anthropologist for a couple of decades. All I knew then was that I was fascinated by the place, by the people, and by the experience. I hadn't been off the ship very long when the tropical heat and humidity seemed to me to be almost unbearable. But, right about then, I saw an ice-cream store, and went in. They were featuring that day what I believe we in America call "Boston coolers." It was a scoop of ice-cream in the well of half a cantaloupe. I can't tell you how delicious it was! The ice-cream was creamy and cold and was just what the doctor ordered for this hot, sweaty sailor. But the real marvel was the cantaloupe. It was rich and soft and wonderfully sweet, just bursting with that flavor of cantaloupe, which, at its best, is without peer for coolness and the power to refresh. I have never since, at least that I can remember, had a piece of cantaloupe that could compare to the one in that sultry Philippine ice-cream shop. Certainly not the pathetic slice I ate a few mornings ago. Actually, I doubt that I will ever taste such cantaloupe again.

But, here is the point, at least for me, of this little story from so long ago and so far away. My treasured memory of that piece of fruit gives me a choice, whenever I eat cantaloupe. I can compare the present one with the fondly remembered one and lament how far the new falls short. Or I can enjoy the present experience for what it is, for what it is offering me right now, and just be glad that I have the memory of the great experience to add to my present pleasure.

You know, this is a very fundamental, archetypal choice that we have to make often. One that shows up in many different guises. Audrey and I are opera lovers, and, until it got to be just too much money and effort, Audrey and I sprung for season tickets every year to the San Francisco and the San Jose Opera. The quality of the productions by both companies is just outstanding.

But, often at San Francisco and always at San Jose, the singers are wonderful but are not the reigning opera superstars. For example, in a Don Carlo at San Francisco many seasons back, the tenor role was sung by Neil Shicoff. He was a very fine tenor, but I think it is fair to say that he fell a bit short of the top-of-the-list superstars, such as Domingo or Pavarotti. So, there was my choice. Should I sit there and enjoy Shicoff for what he was and for the really quite lovely performance he was giving? Or should I sit and let my mind fill up with criticism for his not being Placido Domingo? Tear him down because this Don Carlo was not quite up to a Don Carlo that I had heard ten years before? It was "the cantaloupe challenge."

A while back, I went to an exhibit of Van Gogh paintings at the de Young in Golden Gate Park. It was a stunning collection of dozens of the great artist's paintings, many of which I was quite familiar with from art books and classes, and I was just delighted to see them actually right there a few inches in front of my nose. But one of my companions said on the way home, very disparagingly, "Well, this was nice, but when you have seen the much larger collection in Holland, it didn't seem like much. The "cantaloupe challenge" had struck again!

Rather than let past glories enrich our present experience, it is so easy to deny what is here and now and cry for what we once had but can't have now. I think it is a terrible mistake, because that kind of lament really robs us of our enjoyment of the past as well as the present. If we make the most of our present experiences -- the cantaloupes, tenors and art exhibits that we have now -- then we can celebrate our former ones in memory and let them, in a sense, live again by enriching our present experience. But how tempting it is, at least to me, to do just the opposite.

This is a general human situation which presents itself again and again in life, and which I think, in a way, has to do with what has classically been called the sin of gluttony. Gluttony masquerades itself as something fairly trivial, like eating a second piece of blueberry pie when you are no longer clinically hungry. That is, of course, a form of gluttony, but in my opinion it is strictly minor-league gluttony. Gluttony is one of the so-called "seven deadly sins," and it doesn't get deadly by endorsing second pieces of pie. The really deadly and devastating form of gluttony is to love the goodness of something by always insisting on the best, always craving something bigger and better than what you have before you.

Friends, we live in a society that is profoundly gluttonous, which keeps telling us that bigger is better, that more is better. And as a result, many of us are often restless, never quite satisfied, never truly content with what we have. And this is so very true with regard to past and present experiences. And it is indeed deadly. Life at its best can be seen as a continual parade of gifts, and you can't receive gifts if you are clutching tightly to something else.

I asked Audrey if it would be OK with her for me to use her father as an example of what I am talking about. My father-in-law, Roy, lived in a small town in rural Wisconsin, and had only an eighth-grade education. But everyone loved him very much, and for years he was the mayor of the town. He was, for most of his life, a delightful, wise, witty and fun-loving man, who characteristically saw the best in everyone. But in his declining years, after he lost his wife, he went into a sort of sad and depressed isolation. He had loved her with all his heart, and, when she was gone, he became cynical and bitter and he stopped giving life a chance. He hung on so tightly to his early memories, that he became unable to let himself enjoy the good things that old age might have brought to so gifted and well loved a person. His life came to seem to him as only material for sadness. His experiences only cause for disapproval and bitter comparison with the past. And so, instead of enjoying his memories, and using them to enrich his present moment, he lived out the last years of his life in a reclusive cocoon of disappointment and negativity. It was just sad, so very sad, to see.

It seems strange that so many of us tend to hoard unpleasant things, going over and over them in our minds, storing up grudges, focusing on regrets. And then, along with that, we can so easily take the wonderful things for granted. The beauty of nature. The joys of a life lived in commitment to one we love and who loves us. The majesty of good friendship. The wonder of new experiences. It is as though we fall into thinking that we have all these things coming to us. And so we fall into making those gluttonous comparisons, which belittle the present instead of seeing the present as the wonderful, priceless gift it is.

We can surely have memories, and we can cherish and treasure them, without turning away from the now, without becoming judgmental about our present and about the people, the pleasures, and the places that make it up. Jesus told his disciples that he had come so that their joy may be complete. He was soon to leave them as a fellow human presence, and to become a spiritual presence in their lives. If they had stuck to what they had once had, and insisted that it alone could satisfy, I think they would have lost all that Christ has meant to his disciples ever since. There would have been no Church. And there would not have been much to complete their joy -- or ours.

I think the moral to all this is very clear. As the Good Book says, "Sufficient unto the day is the cantaloupe thereof."

Amen.

But Are Not Grieved Over the Ruin Of Joseph

Date: September 26, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Amos 6:1a,4-7

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.
Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Psalm 146 Page 803, BCP

. . . (put not your trust in rulers nor any child of earth . . . but)
4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the LORD their God;
5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;
6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.
7 The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; *
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
8 The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.
9 The LORD shall reign for ever, *

your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

New Testament Lesson: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time-- he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion.

Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Sermon

It is stewardship season. This is the time of year when the Church talks to all its members about making a pledge for the year ahead so that the work of the Church can continue and grow and reach those who need God's love, and the sacraments, and our teaching and practices and to join us in service to God's world. This is always an act of courage for a pastor because we so often hear "the Church is always asking for money." And it is, of course, asking us to change our lives in many ways, so that we live, no longer for ourselves alone. Of course the church asks for money, and I'd be deeply ashamed as a pastor if I didn't, because if the way we handle money isn't affected, life is not changed. Christ means to change lives, not dress them up in religious clothing.

Meanwhile, the UN is meeting. The Millennium Development Goals aren't coming along very well, esp. after this world-wide recession. And the poor always suffer most in a recession because they have less protection than the rest of us. Can we get back on track to reduce the most desperate poverty by half by 2015? And what causes poverty anyway? Is that a question you can ask of the Bible? Let me paraphrase Amos just a bit.

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure in beautiful Santa Cruz County.
Alas for those who lie on comfortable beds,
and lounge on their recliners watching big-screen TV,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and cook like foodies;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and listen to their very own playlists;
who drink wine whenever they like,
and anoint themselves with the finest cosmetics and treatments,
but are not grieved over the ruin of their own people!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

What is he going on about?? In the time of the prophet Amos, about 750 B.C.E., the people of Israel and the region called Samaria were in great economic pain. Great social change was coming about. The village elders, tribal leaders, the families of the old war-lords, were changing with the changing times. They were the wealthiest, and had been bankers to their people, and help in time of need, chieftains. But times were changing and they were moving to town as it became clear the society was no longer nomadic, and farming wasn't the newest thing anymore. Now owning capital was more lucrative and you didn't need to live in the village or know the villagers any more to make money with your capital.

This brought about two very difficult consequences for the villagers, and one was a result of the other. As the chieftains moved their families to town, they weren't the wealthiest person in the village anymore, and they found they had to work to keep up with the others in their neighborhoods. They needed more money now than they had in the villages, and they no longer saw the hardship of working people first-hand. So they charged more for everything, and in hard times farmers would lose their collateral, whether it was a herd or a farm or a house. Secondly, they didn't keep up relationships with their villagers after a while and that meant every working person's banking relationship become impersonal, dealing with systems that didn't care about your character or your family honor, only with their own bottom line, and if you were in need of a hand in hard times, you'd better hope someone remembered you, which the city people increasingly didn't.

Times change but the temptations don't change. Are these people people, or are they means of production and useful to me? Am I grieved over the ruin of Joseph?

Almost eight hundred years later Jesus was trying to teach some hard-hearted people about how to live with God in our lives in this world and the next. They gave him a lot of grief, unwilling to listen, so he gave them a hard story to try to break through. He told the story of a man who had everything and loved having it, and lived grandly, and lorded it over other people and despised those who were in need, the Ebenezer Scrooge of his day. And Jesus included in the story, shockingly, the point of view of a nobody, too sick to work, without healthcare or family, who died uncared for over a period of months, in the gutter outside the gates of the rich man's estate.

The times have changed here, by eight-hundred years, but the temptations haven't. Out of sight, out of mind. And if the poor are in sight, put them out of your mind and tell yourself they are poor because they are indolent and you are rich because you are industrious – and forget that you are also gifted, that you were given an education and maybe a superb education. Forget that you had advantages in life. Forget the society that had an infrastructure of education and laws and roads and utilities and transportation that support you in your industry. You are self-made and they are beneath notice. In this way, but more subtly, we insulate ourselves from the anxiety of responsibility and mutual regard. Are we, any more than Dives, grieved over the ruin of Joseph, or of our own people?

Yet Jesus, in his story, shows us a different viewpoint, one in which Lazarus is getting a measure of justice and Dives is tormented. Now first, let's try this as an existential dilemma, not a literal prediction. This is about Dives fix, the fix any of us is in when we don't think relationally about those who are worse off than we are. We pull away, we insulate ourselves, we deaden our hearts, and then we wonder where all the thrill and joy in life has gone. You can't selectively reduce the love in your heart. If you stifle it, God's love is thereby forced to flow through a smaller portion of your heart and mind and strength. You are diminished. You are diminished in this life and the next, and only a change of heart, a repentance, a conversion, an opening, a birth from above, can change it. Nothing good can happen until we go to God for guidance because we are grieved, cut the heart, over the ruin of Joseph. Then love can be unleashed from that death-grip we maintain on control of our lives. Then love can bring others into our days and all our joys and sorrows be lived!

Only if we receive the love of God and let it flow through us can we be healed and brought alive again. Then we can experience the joys and sorrows of this life with others and not in isolation and dull misery, not in frantic activity meant to save us from reflection. God wants us to live, for better and for worse, and discover how wonderful this life is when we share it together. In fact, we'll celebrate that a bit at the champagne reception at forum!

Christian love doesn't come naturally. The renovation of our lives is big work. Fortunately, we have a big God. So we just need to ask, and give a little cooperation.

Use the Faith You Have!

Date: October 3, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous--
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
Then the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Psalm 37:1-10 Page 633,BCP

4 Take delight in the LORD, *
and he shall give you your heart's desire.
5 Commit your way to the LORD and put your trust in him, *
and he will bring it to pass.
6 He will make your righteousness as clear as the light *
and your just dealing as the noonday.
7 Be still before the LORD *
and wait patiently for him.

New Testament Lesson: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God-- whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did-- when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Gospel: Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Sermon

Faith is not a supply of powerful potions that you save up until you have enough, or a spray canister that you keep handy in case you are assaulted. It is not a certainty that you own, proof that nothing bad in your eyes can happen. It is not a crutch you can keep handy in case you ever run into something you can't handle. Faith is a relationship of trust, a willingness to surrender and be in God's hands, a readiness to be in this world as a creature, not a god. It is a simplicity of heart that knows there is nothing absolutely unshakeable except God's love for us and willingness to live in that light.

Faith is a gift, in the sense that all relationships are gifts. You can't be in a relationship of love without the other person's gift of their presence, their friendship toward you. If it is treated as a possession, as a thing – well, you know what it is like when someone treats their relationship with you as a given, and feels then can take you for granted, or use you, but no longer be interested in you, respect you, keep discovering more about you. And when it is treated as a gift, faith is a discovery, a blessing, a joy.

Faith is a relationship. Some people do have more of it than others, but this is because they have cultivated the relationship, put themselves daily in the presence of God, asked Jesus for guidance and claimed the power of the Holy Spirit as they went about their days. The doubts don't wither up completely, but the confidence and joy sure do grow. My daughter keeps a quip on her mirror, "Help me to remember, Lord, that nothing is going to happen today that you and I, together, can not handle."

Now let's look at the lessons. The prophet Habakkuk hates his job. "How long will you make me cry "Violence" . . . look at wrong-doing and trouble, . . . strife and contention?" He feels like Nancy Grace. I wonder if she hates her job? But he is faithful in his work for the sake of the people, and God answers him that an end to troubles is not the secret of life, having things as we want them is not the secret of life: "Look at the proud, their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith."

What does he mean? Paul spends the whole of the book of Romans exploring this one sentence. But for now, faith and pride are not friends. Being down-to-earth is basic to the walk with God.

Faith is caught, not taught. Richard Rohr says a Christian is someone who has met one. It is a different way of being. Timothy, the pastor Paul writes in today's lesson, caught it from his grandmother Lois, and in his mother Eunice, and from Paul, who calls it a spirit of power and love and self-discipline, and reminds Timothy to rekindle it constantly.

But the real puzzlers are the admonitions in today's gospel lesson. I think we should call these two stories, "The Gospel according to Yoda" and "The Gospel of Just Doing Your Duty Without Making A Big Deal Of It."

If you've ever seen Star Wars you remember Yoda trying to teach Luke to levitate a light saber or a space ship with his mind. . . is that what Jesus means when he says that you can tell a sycamore tree to jump in the lake at it will obey you? Or that you can move mountains? Yes and no. It is a metaphor. In the Gospel of Yoda the disciples are maybe enthusiastic and ask Jesus to give them more faith. Jesus, do this for me. Jesus, do this. Big brother, do this for me. But he says, quite joyfully, I think, "You don't need more faith. You need to use the faith you already have." You don't need more God, you need to trust God." Don't rely on someone else's faith, learn to use your own. If you have even a tiny bit, and you use it – act on it, trust and move forward – God will be there! Use the faith that you do have!

And, Jesus adds, doing your ordinary duty, the regular stuff that keeps the household running, is not some spectacular big deal, but it is the exercise of faith. Step up, do your part happily, don't begrudge God your simple service in all things. Put your faith to work all the time, don't begrudge God a full day's service. I'll bet this was as difficult for the disciples to swallow as it is for us, it isn't an attitude that comes easily to us. But humble service is a keynote of real faith.

We have a need for this right now in the parish. Folks who will do a simple thing in faith. Every year we do a stewardship campaign. When we make it a campaign it becomes a teaching event, and a learning season, and a time of decision, even conversion.

Why conversion? Because lots of us would like to compartmentalize our lives, and give the sadness, the worries, the emergencies to God, along with the hope of heaven and the search for meaning; while we keep business and money and other things we consider "practical" to ourselves. After all, what does God know about markets, margins, speculation, saving, pensions, whatever our concerns are. But the human heart is not so easily divided.

Jesus spoke most about the kingdom of God – what it means to live with God moment-by-moment. And second-most? He talked about money, and the ways it works in the human heart and in society, for justice or injustice, for blessing or temptation. If you count the verses in the New Testament, the words of Jesus, how we handle money is his second-most frequent topic. Its that important. And he is the one who said, "Where your treasure is, your heart will follow." Ebenezer Scrooge – didn't I mention him last week? – is what happens to you if you don't ask God's guidance in finance.

Now we try to have fun with this season, no reason that learning shouldn't be fun. So this year we are doing a pilgrimage theme, delivering pledge materials to each home. And this evening we are having a dinner to prepare the pilgrims – and for others to check out, if they are just interested. There'll be another preparation session for those who can't come today, but tonight it comes with dinner. And I'm saying to you, I think this is one of those times when it is good to step up and do a good thing, and not begrudge God a simple service. You might even meet some nice people and have some fun along the way.

Faith isn't for emergencies, it is a way of living all moments. Relate to God by doing all things Godward. Relate to God by doing the simple things that make life work. Relate to God by using the faith that you do have. The righteous shall live by their faith, says Habakkuk. And God will let them move sycamore trees, sometimes mountains.

Dignity and Faith and Civility

Date: October 17, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 32:22-3

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Psalm 121, Page 779, BCP

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
2 My help comes from the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
5 The LORD himself watches over you; *
the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
6 So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.
7 The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.
8 The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.

New Testament Lesson: Timothy 3:14-4:5

As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Gospel: Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Sermon

St. Paul teaches his young protégé and pastor Timothy how to preach: I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The work of an evangelist: I want to share with you one of the reasons I think you and I do well when we bring others to worship with us in the Episcopal Church.

The time is coming when people will not put up with sound reasoning, but having itching ears, will want teachers who will tell them what they already think, or what they already feel . . . even channels, and blogs and radio programs that do this!

A society divided against itself cannot stand. Elections are coming. Most of the campaigning from both parties is negative ads aimed at the gullible, designed to increase partisanship and reduce commonality, understanding, or any sense of the common good. God is not on the side of anybody who mostly screams at the opposition in one form or another, lying about them, demonizing them. This does not lead to the common good, and God cares about the common good. God's covenants with humankind are always about the common good. Negative ads don't lead there.

If this nation was settled with visions of being a city on a hill, a beacon of freedom, the bedrock of that freedom, of any freedom in this world, is the God-given dignity of every human being. And every time we set out to vilify someone, we disqualify ourselves for the creation of that freedom. We cannot do good in that way.

This can make us feel weak, when others can speak so forcefully, so damningly, and we have to be measured and truthful. But in the end, they spend all their capital and are proved liars or haters. Over time, what will we be proved?

Forming relationships of respect, understanding others, seeing other points of view are slow and costly. But They also give us greater understanding, greater range in our thinking, and influence for the good in community instead of the impotent rage of the armchair. But we don't always have the skills and inner discipline for community life, and we are often tempted to rage and partisanship, even though we know them to be great evils. They tempt us, they drain us of life and love, they leave us weary and withdrawn.

God offers us another way. The Episcopal Church offers us another way. I want to talk with you today about Dignity, Civility and Being Episcopalian.

What particularly does the Episcopal Church have to offer those who don't yet have a faith? What heritage do we have that is a particular blessing in this beautiful, fragile world of ours, in these cynical and polarized times?

Our church was born in the resurrection of Jesus and the Pentecost of the Holy Spirit. Of course the first answer is, we have Jesus to offer, our experience of walking with Jesus in prayer, in liturgy, in community, in sacraments, in service and in study. But our separate denomination was born in controversy, and we should never forget it . . . and that has had a huge effect on what we have become.

The sixteenth century was a time of great polarization. The nation-states were rising. The control of Rome over the church in the Western world was being questioned. Henry the VIII was not willing to be manipulated by the Pope for political ends. Henry was no saint, but neither were the pope's reasons for controlling Henry anything to do with faith. The Reformation of the faith was taking place in other countries and there were tremendous pressures in England, too, for reform. But the partisanship was extreme. Should worship be in Latin or the language of the people? Should the Bible be translated into English so that ordinary people could read it? Should Rome regulate the lives of all people, from kings to the least of them, or were they to use their minds, their consciences, their local communities for discernment? Should the sacraments be withheld when the hierarchy was displeased with political decisions?

People took sides in quite terrible ways. The country was polarized between Rome and reform movements. As Henry's successors took the throne the country veered from Protestant to so-called Catholic and back again, with all the division, all the disruption, all the be-headings and burnings the rulers thought necessary. This continued until Elizabeth the Queen made a decision that her church would not be such a place, and that she would not make each of her clergy prove loyalty to her exact beliefs on every point, but would allow them to lean to one side or the other or a third, so long as they affirmed the basics of the Christian faith.

This was the "middle way" the "via media" that came to characterize Anglicanism and has given us our character to this day. We do not have a non-negotiable teaching on every subject. Instead we have Scripture, we have Tradition – the teachings of the first four ecumenical councils in the early centuries of Christianity, and we have reason: that is, the considered judgment of the well-formed and mature Christian conscience.

Elizabeth the Queen decided she was not entitled, under God, to go over people with a fine-toothed comb deciding if their beliefs were worthy or not. I think the Episcopal Church's deep foundation in this attitude has given us room to grow into our faith throughout this life, not acting as one another's judges. And this has had enormous effect on the breadth of our thinking, and on who is welcome in God's house. We believe, with the Queen, that it is God's house, not ours, and that not all questions should be definitively settled in this life. We are not saved by knowing things, but in walking with a living God, and learning as we go. Our prayers and worship form the way we live, and we hope to live increasingly toward God, and that is our path in this life.

This means that we have enormous respect for one another. Not because it is obvious to us that every person deserves it. Because we know that God is kind and forgiving with us, and how little we ourselves deserve it. If God has created, and Christ come to save someone, and these are given, then we must also have respect for what God may be up to in them.

The trouble with this attitude, this faith-stance, is this. It means that the other guy may have a point. It means he may have a history that has made the point of view that seems so frustrating to me make sense to him. It means that no matter how mean or irrational I may think she is being (or she I) I can't just dismiss her as evil or idiotic. My path to the common good is to respect, evaluate, make common cause where there is common ground. It doesn't mean that everyone is a good partner for community or even for conversation. It does mean I never help when I hate.

It means that, as a church, we have an obligation to civil conversation, to really hear our brothers and sisters with our hearts and with our minds, and risk being changed here and there as we seek to show others what we value. It means we Anglicans are a good partner for these conversations the world around, conversations between many cultures, difficult conversations, as our faith finds expression in many of the world's cultures. Because we understand God's investment in the dignity of every human being, we have an investment in working for the common good, and in treating each person with respect. The question may be fiscal policy, immigration, how to stop hate crimes, or who we want to make our laws and govern us. We can talk about these things and many others, because civility is founded in dignity, and dignity in God. Don't you know people who need and want to be a part of that?

Don't Duck "Zacchaeus Moments"

Date: October 31, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 1:10-18

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation--
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

Psalm 32:1-8 Page 624, BCP

1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!
2 Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, *
and in whose spirit there is no guile!
3 While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long.
4 For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.
5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, *
and did not conceal my guilt.
6 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." *
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.
7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.
8 You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; *
you surround me with shouts of deliverance

Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Sermon

Halloween movies - I can't watch them, some of you do. Guilty pleasures, right? But they are all about how you finally destroy the bad guy. They all have "don't turn your back, you fool, he's not dead yet!" moments in them. And these days, the elections are sort of the same, all about vanquishing an evil foe. But that is not the way it works in real life, the kingdom of God. We pray, "forgive our enemies and turn their hearts." It is the restoration of our foe, seeking the lost, healing the community that our God is all about, that life is really about.

People have Zacchaeus moments all the time. Let's learn to see them. Let's make it our St. John's practice to see them. The people in my life have them. The people in your life have them. Thoreau said that most people live lives of quiet desperation. Did he mean morally, economically, spiritually? There are many moments in most lives when we feel the stirring of hope and a catch in our voice. And if someone were to notice, to listen kindly in that moment and share it with us, we might bring into the light that which most needs our attention. And if someone who trusts God in their lives were to be kind to us in such a moment, and to take us seriously in that moment, we might even bring that yearning into the presence of God, who gave us that yearning in the first place. Those yearnings are clues to our real destiny, clues to what we were meant to be.

People have Zacchaeus moments, when they invite us to invite them into life and hope. Often we choose not to notice, or if we notice, to make a little joke and pass the moment off as awkward. This is polite, but leaves us all more lonely than we were, because something might have been, and now it will not be. Sometimes we're just afraid, afraid of our own hopes, or afraid we don't have what they might need. Sometimes we're afraid they won't trust our friendship if we offer it. And maybe they won't. Heaven knows some people use these moments to gain confidences they can gossip about, or use to manipulate us. Maybe they'd test us a little to see if we meant it, but would that be so bad? Maybe we'd be a little awkward. Maybe that is better than looking away and refusing the invitation. Maybe we need to say, "God be with us." and step in to the conversation.

Today's lesson is this, but it is written really on a really large canvas. This isn't your brother-in-law who you don't like very much Jesus is talking about. Imagine instead that you have resented a crooked leader in your community for years. They've cost many people dearly in their unjust dealings, and you have long thought about how wonderful it would be if they were caught, brought up on charges, forced to pay honest penalties for all they've done and restitution, even, to those they'd wronged. You've thought about how sweet that day would be: wrong-doers put on notice; people made whole; a blight on the community lifted; and maybe, even, really wished that could happen.

Now what if, in that situation, one day the doer of all this wrong woke up to reality, like the prodigal son, and came forward and said, "I'm going to pay my debt to society - the penalty for fraud and extortion, the restitution I owe. I want to make it right."

And what would be the cause of this? In our story, two things stand out: a teachable moment, and an act of loving agitation. Zacchaeus had the teachable moment. He was rich with ill-gotten gains. He was

widely resented. He was short. He climbed up in a tree to see Jesus arrive in town. Which of these does not sound likely? Something is going on in Zacchaeus, God is at work, as God is so often at work, and Jesus notices. Maybe he has divine knowledge of what is going on in Zacchaeus, angels whispering in his ears that when he comes to Jericho he'll meet a man who the crowd despises, a guy who can't go into the crowd because they'd all pull away from him with disgust, he'll be well-dressed, but in despair, hoping against hope for a new life, not that he'll know that. . . but I don't believe that. Jesus doesn't need foreknowledge; that is letting ourselves off the hook too easily.

Jesus, walking into town with his disciples, saw what he was looking for, what he was always looking for – somebody whose hunger and readiness for faith was right there to be seen. When he sees the guy in the expensive suit up in a tree, he is able to put two and two together. Outcast, rich, wretched or guilty or hopeful. Would it be your impulse, as the visiting rabbi, to give the guy a break, to turn your head, not make a big thing of his humiliation up there? Would you discreetly pass him by and hope he'd come to you in some private moment? Jesus sees the moment as an opportunity to teach the kingdom to all, as well as meet Zacchaeus. He sees God at work in a lost human heart, can't bear to let it pass, walks right up to him, knowing that to touch this guy or enter his house is to be defiled, and risking the wrath of a crowd that hates the guy, invites himself and all his disciples over to dinner.

This is the kingdom – seek out the lost and welcome them home. Which means, when people are in need, speak to that need, share your hope, invite them into the life of God who is already at work in them. Invite them into your community of disciples, as people beloved of God.

Zacchaeus didn't know this welcome was possible, but when he heard Jesus was coming to town something wells up in him, and he came clean right there in public, confessed his crimes, promised to make restitution. And Jesus declared that salvation had arrived – this is the kingdom – Zacchaeus will not be unclean anymore, but a brother again, a child of Abraham again. The crowd said angrily, "This is who he wants to eat with?" Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and restore the lost." Yep, I want to eat with him, too.

People all have Zacchaeus moments, moments of vulnerability, when just a word, just a little shared hope, could take them in a new direction, and they are inviting an invitation. Jesus spent his ministry scanning for those moments.

You are God's agent in the world. Next time you see a Zacchaeus moment, will you duck, or will you reach out?

The Saints in Our Balcony

Date: November 7, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

This morning we are celebrating All Saints' Day. It is appropriate that this is one of the four days each year when we do public baptisms. And it is equally appropriate that today we are installing our new font and, at the eleven o'clock service, baptizing Vivian Joyce. I say it is appropriate on All Saints' Day because Holy Baptism is the Church's liturgy for making saints. We all tend to think that a "saint" is a particular hero of the Church, like St. Francis or St. Paul, and that is indeed one meaning of the word, but in the Bible the "saints" are simply the Christians, all baptized persons, people like you and me. So may I say to all you saints gathered here this morning that when Fr. Steve makes the sign of the cross on Vivian Joyce's forehead with holy water we will be marking her as a saint, and every time you bless yourself with the sign of the cross and water from this font, that blessing will be a renewal of the indelible cross that was made on your brow at your baptism.

I believe we each have a number of folks who are our personal saints, and I want to say something about that this morning.

A familiar prayer and the epistle to the Hebrews speak of us as being surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses." I believe we have many such witnesses who speak to us with inner and outer voices. They live in our lives, in our memories, in the emotional cellars of our being. And they speak to us, some in negative and some in positive voices. The negative voices are difficult and can be destructive. Voices from outside that see to it that none of our mistakes go unnoticed; voices from inside that lay upon us wave after wave of guilt. These negative voices can play havoc with our lives, so part of our spiritual path is to learn to deal with them. But many of the voices that we hear speaking to us from within and without – from friends and from fantasies, from memories and from mentors – these voices are wonderfully positive and spur us onward. They are our own personal saints.

I once read a spiritual writer who had a splendid image for these positive voices. He said that they were his "balcony people." He envisioned a balcony filled with people and circling around his life. There in the balcony were his cheerleaders, standing up, leaning over the rail, and shouting words of encouragement and support. I think we all have such a balcony of saints, crowded with people, some dead and some still living, each in her or his own way urging us on with love and supportive enthusiasm. Each telling us that we are wonderful. We need to listen

to these people. We need to linger in their presence. They are our particular saints, and we need to draw life and courage from them for the daily struggles of our lives.

Who are the saints on your balcony? Who are the voices that cheer you on toward the greatness that God knows you are capable of? Who inspire you to do your best, even in a world that often seems to be at its worst? Take a few minutes this afternoon, or when you get a chance, and make your list. Our balcony people should not be taken for granted. They are our teachers, our heroes and heroines, our supporters, our dearest friends, our positive critics, our leaders. They are the voice of God, reminding us that we are beloved.

Let me tell you about some of the people in my balcony, about a couple of voices that are there for me. One is a professor I had in seminary. He was a man who always inspired awe in me for his great learning and his great wisdom, but more than that for his wonderful enthusiasm and joy in life and in the people in his life. He saw something good in almost everyone, and he infectiously helped them see that good in themselves. He was not just a teacher in the lecture hall. We stayed friends and colleagues for many decades, until he died about five years ago, and every time we got together I would come out strengthened and bucked up. He is there, and always will be, in my balcony.

Another person in my balcony is a Jesuit priest and a cultural anthropologist, who led me toward Philippine social research and who helped me catch a vision of combining academic scholarship and the priesthood into a single life journey. In the years we knew each other as friends, fellow priests, and fellow lovers of the Philippine people, we spoke of many things, both light and heavy. The message that always came through – whether we were talking cultural studies, or theology, or Philippine politics – was “You can do it, Stu. You can do it well, Stu. You can make a difference, Stu.” My Jesuit friend died about thirty years ago, but he is still there on my balcony, urging me forward when things seem too dark or heavy, saying, “You can do it.”

There are so many. There are people like my best friend from the university who still knows how to love in a world so often possessed with anger, cynicism, and numbness. There are people I know who still have the courage to trust in a world riddled with suspicion. There are some who still know how to be truthful and genuine in a world of personal, commercial, and political lies. They are all among my saints and they are in my balcony.

Our balconies are, of course, our own personal communion of saints, our own personal great cloud of witnesses. When I grow discouraged or down on myself, when the negative voices seem so loud, I need to hear my saints, leaning over the rail of that great balcony and saying, "Onward, Stu, you can do it. You've got it in you to be and do all that God is calling you to." I don't always believe that within myself, and I get down and blue. But if I open my ears to my balcony, it lifts me up and gets me going again.

These balcony people of ours are ordinary, flawed folks. All the saints are flawed, because all human beings are. But grace comes to us so powerfully through them. The thing is that they have a faith and courage that shines out of the midst of all their flaws, and that is what makes them so vital in the balconies of our lives. We all need our balconies, God knows, and we all need our balcony people. They help us live. They help us overcome our self-indulgence and our failings of self-esteem. They help us feel encouraged to hang in there in the dark times, when relationships falter, when hope seems hard, and when dreams dissolve.

Friends, I have been saying that we all need our balcony people, but that is only half the story. The rest of the story is that we are all profoundly needed to be balcony people, ourselves, for the other people in our lives. They need us to be their cheerleaders, part of their great cloud of witnesses, encouraging them and bucking them up to survive and prevail. We need each other, to love each other. Fr. Steve needs us, and we need him. I need you and you need me. Your family needs you, and you need them. Your neighbors need you, and you need them. Little Vivian Joyce needs us, and we need her. We all need to be out there on each other's balconies. And when we do that, then we are not just being good friends and neighbors; we are staking out our place in the communion of saints. We are joining our voices in the wonderful chorus of all the saints.

Amen.

Proper 29C

Date: November 21, 2010

Preacher: Rev. John Duncan

Sermon

Today is Proper 29, the last Sunday of the Church Year. It is also known as the Festival of Christ the King. We can see this in the Collect that prays, "Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords."

Well, I'm inclined to believe that we twenty-first century Americans have issues with the idea of a king. We want the government to solve our problems but not infringe on our personal freedoms. This past week the banner issue has been airport security screenings. It has been several years since any terrorists have managed to bring down aircraft on American soil, and we do forget easily. Still, I'm sure those who scream the loudest about airport screenings would also be the loudest to complain that the government wasn't doing enough to protect us if someone did bring down a plane. We'll see how it all plays out.

The question remains, are we willing to accept a real king, even one whose rule is gracious? Kings can't be out voted. We don't get to choose what we will obey and what we will not obey. We don't get the chance to change our minds at the next election. Yet the Scripture and the traditions of the Church are clear, Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. What happens if we take the Kingship of Jesus seriously? Let's begin looking at our Scripture Lessons.

The Lesson from Jeremiah begins, "'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!' says the LORD." The term "shepherds" refers to the leaders of the people. You may remember that David was called the Shepherd King, but the metaphor was not unique to Israel. The Hyksos, another Semitic people, who conquered and ruled northern Egypt in the 17th and 16th centuries BC chose to be known as the Shepherd Kings of Egypt. Jeremiah pronounces judgment on the shepherds of Israel who have scattered rather than tended their flock. Because of this, Jeremiah says, the LORD will gather the remnant of the flock and then he will raise up shepherds over them and they will not be afraid. This is a great promise! The passage ends, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." Christians have long seen this as speaking of Jesus.

The Lesson from Colossians tells us that the Father has "rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Then Paul goes on to tell us about the Son, into whose kingdom we have been transferred. "(The Son) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ... in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, ... in him all things hold together, he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Reconciliation and forgiveness are key themes in this Lesson.

The Gospel Lesson stands in stark contrast to the glorification of kingship. We may wonder if this somehow got mixed up with Good Friday. Here we have a portion of the Passion narrative. "When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'" Then the Gospel tells us how the leaders, then the people mocked Jesus, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Next we are reminded that the inscription on the cross which was the charge against him said, "This is the King of the Jews." After that we hear about the exchange between Jesus and the criminals who were hanged with him. The one is mocking but the other rebuked the mocker and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Once more forgiveness and reconciliation are key themes.

What can we make of all this? First we can see that Jesus is a very different kind of King. He is the one who dies on the cross. He is the one who proclaims forgiveness, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus is the one who promises the thief Paradise. Jesus is the king who chooses not to use his power to save himself from the cross. The mark of Jesus' kingdom is our redemption and the forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness is an important theme in the kingship of Jesus. It is the sign of the kingdom and it is also what we are called to do, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." In the kingship of Jesus, "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, ... by making peace through the blood of his cross. The cross is central to the kingship of Jesus. Finally, the kingship of Jesus is the work and gift of God. It is not something that was done by human effort, but it was brought about by the power of God.

For all of us Americans there is still an element of choice. The kingship of Jesus is brought about by the power of God, and we are transferred into the kingdom by the power and gift of God, but there is still the element of choice. We have to choose to follow Jesus. We have to choose to give our lives to Jesus. Jesus is not a king who uses force or coercion. It is up to us to choose to give our lives to Jesus. It is up to us to want to be part of his most gracious kingdom. It is up to us to decide we want to forgive and be forgiven and to be reconciled with God.

Remember the thief. He has to ask. He didn't ask for much. He only asked to be remembered, to not be a forgotten life on the scrap heap of history. Jesus gave him much more. Jesus gave him Paradise.

Therefore I invite you today to seek first the Kingdom of God and see if all else will be added to you.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

About Our Preachers

Rev. Steve Ellis, Rector of The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist



I realized in my early twenties that I needed to understand my faith, and this Christ who was changing my life (very much for the better). Since then I've been trying to mine the ancient stuff, the Scriptures, history, and the world we live in, to find the keys to joy, courage, hope and integrity. It felt like it was my vocation to give voice to that, and that led me to this work.

One of the keys turned out to be a loving community of faith in which we can find our way. A community in which we challenge and encourage one another and are nurtured, in which we can share our variety of amazing gifts, in which we learn of God from one another. St. John's has been a great blessing to me, being open to this kind of exploration. We don't have to have all the answers. The world is changing and we need to discover ways to be faithful in this present world God is giving us, for the sake of right living, justice, joy and the common good.

Rev. John Duncan, Assisting Priest



I am a third generation Californian. Growing up in Campbell I remember going to Church at St. John's as a child while the family was on vacation in Capitola. I was educated at San Jose State, and Pacific School of Religion and Church Divinity School of the Pacific. In 1961 I married Janet Meckler, another California native. We have three children and three grandchildren.

Ordained in the Diocese of Northern California I served on the staff of Trinity Cathedral, as chaplain at Sacramento State, Director of Camp Noel Porter in Tahoe City and Vicar of St. Andrews in the Highlands before returning to central California and All Saints', Watsonville. In 1971 I was Interim Pastor at St. John's until the call of Larry Mickelsen, and a few years later I was acting Rector while Larry was on Sabbatical Leave. In 1983 I became Rector of Grace Church, Fairfield and served there until retiring in 2000 and moving to my late mother's home in Aptos/Seacliff.

In retirement I enjoy foster care for Border Collie Rescue, serving as Docent at Seacliff State Beach, playing tuba in the Cabrillo College Bands and visiting Scotland as often as I can afford. In 2006 I served as Interim Pastor at St. Philip's, Scotts Valley, and these days Janet and I divide our ministry between St. John's, St. Philip's and Episcopal Marriage Encounter. I love Marriage Encounter, music, living on Monterey Bay, and I usually pray the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic.

Rev. Eliza Linley, Assisting Priest



I'm Eliza Linley, and I've been an associate priest at St. John's since 2002. I first came to St. John's as an architectural/process consultant to help with the transition to a new building (construction finally starts this spring!). And then I stayed. What can I say? One of St. John's charms is friendliness.

My husband, David Richardson, and I have just moved to Aptos full time after years of commuting from Berkeley. I'm delighted to be able to come to church events during the week, and to live where my studio is. I'm an artist as well as an architect, and I'm passionate about the visual arts and arts ministries. The arts are a whole theological language we can use to talk to and about God when words just won't do the job.

Here's what I'm interested in exploring in the coming year:

- More visual arts in worship
- A spiritual inquiry and support group for visual artists
- A Christian/Muslim/Jewish women's book group

I think people come to St. John's out of spiritual hunger, and stay to be part of God's family where all our gifts are welcome. Communities change, like the old story of stone soup, when new gifts are poured into the pot. If you are looking for a church home, come and help us create community and a vision of the Reign of God.

Rev. Stu Schlegel, Assisting Priest



My wife and I have been members at St. John's since 2004. I am Rector Emeritus at St. Luke's Church, Los Gatos and for 20 years was Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I lived for many years in the Philippines and Indonesia. I love St. John's for the warmth and excellent spirit of its people, and for the parish's intense commitment to social justice.

Cross-Reference of Sermons and Preachers

Rev. Eliza Linley, 14, 24, 40, 67, 88, 91, 106

Rev. John Duncan, 133

Rev. Steve Ellis, 9, 16, 28, 32, 37, 43, 52, 55, 59,
62, 70, 76, 80, 84, 95, 101, 112, 117, 126

Rev. Stu Schlegel, 12, 22, 48, 130