



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

Aptos, CA 95003

Sermons 2011 Church Year: Advent 2010 – Pentecost 2011

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.

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The Great Reversal

Date: December 12, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Psalm 146:4-9: Page 803, BCP

New Testament Lesson: James 5:7-10

Gospel: Matthew 11: 2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Sermon

The baptismal promises are our way of life. The Moses/Jesus/Church story is our story, and we are part of its ongoing life. The prayers and Scriptures and Sacraments are our sustenance, the community is Christ's body, his hands in the world, his presence for us and others. This is a way of life that could not have existed if Jesus had chosen to set the world right with armies, with coercive power, instead of investing his life and death in a fearless love.

Folks tell me they are put off by the violence in the Holy Scriptures, like the violence in this part of Isaiah. But friends, the Scriptures go right to the human condition, and confront us with our inner life just as much as they confront the ills in society. They must(?) for they are calling us to be healed, and there is never healing without diagnosis.

Besides, the Scriptures are a record of the awakening of human consciousness, and each book speaks in the wisdom of its own time and culture. Later passages may critique what an earlier passage said. That is the situation with the Isaiah and Matthew today. Isaiah gives us a vision of the time of the Messiah: that the deaf will hear, the blind will see, the lame walk, etc, but it is introduced with these words:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear / Here is your God. / He will come with vengeance, / with terrible recompense. / He will come and save you." ~ Isaiah 35

That may be good news to people under occupation. But maybe we listen to those words and cringe, that God will save his people "with great and terrible vengeance", paying their enemies back, getting even. That doesn't sound to us like the Christian God. But it was state of the art stuff in Isaiah's day, and it was still the line of John the Baptist six hundred years later. He believed, like Mary, Jesus mother, that

the Messiah would cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly – and probably do it with a revolution – or the intervention of an angelic army with terrible swift swords.

In today's gospel we have the Baptizer in prison, and it is a painful scene, because we know he isn't going to get out. He has offended King Herod's wife in a way she won't forgive. And stuck in prison, perhaps in existential crisis, he has to deal with his disappointment in the way things are working out. He's in prison and Jesus isn't measuring up.

Now we all have angers and doubts and disappointments, so we can feel for John. And he does just the right thing, he takes them to Jesus. What could be smarter? John is our role model in this. Too often we do not go after God with our fears and our blame – and so God does not get to teach us, to guide and strengthen us.

But John cries out, wise man? He sends his disciples to Jesus with a public message of doubt and disapproval. John expects the coming of the kingdom to be a great reversal, casting down the mighty, lifting up the lowly. So does Jesus, and he's doing a lot of lifting up the lowly. But John assumes the mighty have to come down by violence, while Jesus brings another way.

So when John's disciples come to Jesus, bringing the rebuke of their master, right in front of a crowd the messiah is teaching, Jesus responds. He quotes Isaiah back to John - the deaf hear, the blind see, both literally and metaphorically are occurring, Isaiah's signs of the times are right there - to encourage John to trust. But he adds an ominous word, a word of freedom, that makes it sound as if Jesus is the criterion by which others will decide their fate: he says, "Blessed are they who do not take offense at me." Jesus is not going to use the violence that John expects, not even to establish God's kingdom. But he's not powerless.

Now here's a question. I know you don't want to be Herod's wife, full of rage and about to have him beheaded? But do you want to be John with his anger and fears - a good man in a tight spot, or do you want to be Jesus in his freedom, love and faith. They both give their lives. Which way is yours?

When John's disciples have gone to take the message, Jesus turns to the crowd to ask the same of them. John told these people that God was about to do a new thing, he warned them to be ready. But it really is a new thing, such a new thing that not even John was able to anticipate it. God is out to give hope to a weary world. But the new thing won't come about from the old ways. A new way of thinking, a new way of living, a new spirit is about to get a foothold in the human realm. Because Jesus' way of setting us free has little to do with armies, even angel armies, but with changing our hearts, and giving us new tools for making a life together.

So Jesus asks the crowd about John, "What did you go out in the wilderness to look at? Not a reed shaken by the wind? If not that, then what, some kind of sheikh? Those are in palaces, not out here. So what were you looking for? A prophet? And that is what you got, probably the best prophet ever. (Really? On a par with Moses? This is going to offend?) But Jesus isn't finished. You found the

greatest prophet ever. But every single person who enters the kingdom of God will be greater than John?

This is a qualitative shift, a quantum leap, a movement to a new level of fulfilling our humanity. John never dreamed that God could make such changes in the human realm without top-down control, that God was patient, that God was so full of love as to want to make us full of love, and not just outwardly compliant. John could not imagine a gospel – Who could? – in which God would take the stuff of his own life and spend it for our sake, and call us to take the stuff of our own lives and spend it for one another, and in this way really create love between us. You invest in people, you come to love them.

It is a counter-intuitive quantum leap because we move from strength to service. We move to greater power, but people didn't know that. It is a message that requires a huge reversal from its hearers. We who so often grow weary of injustice and want to lash out, who lose patience and are tempted by violent words, harsh actions, wanting to denounce offenders, to exclude people from community, to force compliance – we are asked to enter the kingdom, to surrender all that, to have our own hearts healed and forgiven. But the transformation must be real. We must let love work through us, a real and costly love.

It is just a few words later in the gospel that Jesus says that “men of violence have been trying to take the kingdom by violence” – we try to make God's kingdom by violence – and we have to let that go. God's love will win the day, or it won't be won at all. Kingdom life will come by the presence of God being manifest in us.

It is a qualitative change, a wholesale reversal of consciousness. This is what the life of the church is meant to be and to nurture. As we surrender the old way, God can enter in to us, and through us, to others. This is the gift of Jesus. It is for this reason only that Jesus can say “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than” John.

Which way is yours? Oh, brothers and sisters, let God be great in you.

Advent 4, Year A

Date: December 19, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

[Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

[New Testament Lesson: Romans 1:1-7](#)

[Gospel: Matthew 1: 18-25](#)

Sermon

Matthew tells us what Joseph did about Mary and her unexpected pregnancy, but this gospel doesn't tell us a thing about what went through his mind. From the text, we can imagine that Joseph's dream involved an angel in white, with wings, outlining the program: conception by the Holy Spirit, the coming of salvation, etc.. On waking, Joseph bought the concept, hook line and sinker, no questions asked, and did what he was told. Maybe so. We'll never know.

Or did he lie awake on subsequent nights, flipping through a mental lineup of all the young men in the village, gnashing his teeth and wondering, angel or no angel, dream or no dream, which one of these good-for-nothing young bucks did this insidious thing to his intended, Mary, his PROPERTY. Was he anxious about public opinion? What if the baby looked like somebody else's child? If this dream was to be taken seriously, what does a child of God look like, anyway? Or, being human, did Joseph perhaps vacillate between all these possibilities, having good days and bad, times of faith, and times of monumental doubt? One thing we know, is that Joseph had plenty of time to think on these things. In the end, of course, he did the right thing. Let's say it was the dream and the angel.

But, and perhaps this is only a footnote to history, or divine revelation, it should be noted that Joseph did the loving thing. He did not make a public spectacle of the pregnant teenager and send her packing. He didn't even do the thing he had planned, which was to send her back to her parents quietly, with no questions asked. No; he went ahead with the betrothal and the wedding and the birth and raised the boy as his own. Maybe it was because of what the angel said. Or maybe he thought that, while dreams of this kind might be terribly important, it was also probably God's will not to leave this young woman and her baby out in the cold but to give them a home and take care of them, and that God would sort out the rest.

As a recent grandmother, I am stunned at the changes a baby – any baby - makes in all of our lives. I see these new parents becoming extremely knowledgeable and (this is what gets me) endlessly patient. The baby is wet, she is changed, 10 minutes later her diaper is wet again, she fusses, and she gets a new one. Nobody else complains. If she wakes up every hour all night long, as has happened, there's someone there to feed her, to comfort her, to soothe her back to sleep. These two caregivers are not the same

people who met at the Death Guild Dome at Burning Man. A miracle has taken place. And we've changed, too. There's a softening that takes place when a baby's involved. Even in the middle of hectic preparations for a holiday, nothing else now matters quite so much as relationships, and, of course, that the baby's ok. When baby's happy, everybody's happy. And that's just a normal, ordinary baby. Not Jesus.

And so how do we deal with a not-ordinary, a baby who is at once human and divine? How do we, like Joseph, do right by Mary and the child she gives to us? We can lie awake at night worrying about the many things that are wrong. We can defend ourselves with cynicism in the face with whatever real-life miracle God puts before us. We can be equally cynical about what God was doing through Mary. The demands of faith may be too much, an optional extra for which we simply don't have time, and an investment of faith and action that has no room in our cluttered, busy lives. No room in the inn for this miracle! Thinking of Christmas as just a story gives us an excuse to put it aside or pick it up as time permits.

And so we handle the existential angst of this dark time of the year by fussing. While we rush around creating Christmas and, like as not, getting it all wrong, Joseph walked in faith. He counted on God to get it right, whatever "it " might be, to shield Mary from the censure of prying eyes, to heal his own bewilderment, and to ensure that the child born, whatever "divine" meant, was winsomely and engagingly human. Joseph's faith calls us to do likewise. If an ordinary baby can soften our hearts into paying attention to the things that really matter, the things that are of God, how much more this child of God for whom we have been waiting, the One who is waiting even now to be born in our hearts?

The cultural or religious problem for Joseph (and maybe for us, too?) is that, a product of his time and place, he expected God to act in power and might as God did on Sinai, in bringing Israel out of Egypt, in all those mighty deed of salvation history. It must have seemed out of character for God to break into human history in the weakness and vulnerability of a baby. But God knew...babies just get us every time! It's just that it's hard for us to get our minds around loving-in-weakness being the solution.

It could be that Joseph, in his weaker moments, wanted to lock Mary in her room till the baby was born and then divorce her. But he didn't. He looked after her, loved her, and struggled down that road from Nazareth to Bethlehem with her. Once he's done the hard work of raising this child – fleeing to Egypt, coming back, losing him in the Temple, Joseph just fades from the story. We never hear about him again. Yet if Mary is extraordinarily faithful in accepting God's call to be Mother of the Messiah, in his own way, Joseph shares in that faithfulness to a remarkable degree. So let's keep a soft spot in our hearts for Joseph, the ordinary dad who was extraordinarily faithful.

It's not too late to get Christmas right this year, to stop, reflect, realize that while many of the preparations we have made since Thanksgiving may have seemed important, they're not exactly about Christmas. Maybe in the next few days we can stop thinking that it all depends on our presents and our cooking. It all depends on God's giving. Like Joseph, we may expect, but not control. And when God acts

by dwelling among us and taking on our humanity...make the baby happy! Keep Christmas joyfully. Forget the fuss. Remember the relationships. Because when Baby Jesus is happy – everybody's happy!

Grace and Truth for Entering the Presence

Date: December 25, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Psalm: 98 Page 727, BCP

He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, * and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"?

Or again,
"I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
"Let all God's angels worship him."

Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire."

But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

And,
"In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will never end."]

Gospel: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Sermon

I've just read a wonderful book, Mary Karr's memoir, *Lit*. It is painful, and eventually, holy. She describes what it is like to be afraid to hope, to be constantly angry, and furiously ungrateful. In other words, she felt alone in the world. Alone in a hostile universe. Addiction makes these things worse, and she was pretty lost, but the basic dynamic is something most people experience, and some people hang on to all their lives. In anger and perhaps despair, they call it "being realistic", and say it is just the way the world is. Harsh, uncaring, without meaning except what you make for yourself, and that of no enduring significance, even if it is important to you. Relationships are only about what you can get, about mutual convenience, and love is really just a feeling that may come and may go, not a way of life, not the meaning of the universe from before the dawn of time.

In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan/ earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone, says the Christmas carol, and I think, the bleak midwinter of our hearts, when we had no hope, and no way to know that there was hope. Air sounds mournful. Earth hard as iron – who isn't tempted to feel that sometimes? Water (which should give life) like a stone.

Now, indulge me for a moment. Just a brief exercise in "holy imagination". Make a space in your heart for this situation: Say you have a deep desire to reach someone you love, someone who has cut themselves off from you, or been caught up with a dangerous crowd and is no longer able to think straight, with a cynical crowd who has poisoned their minds against you, made you into a monster or a myth, an abuser or a figment of the imagination.

That loss is terrible, isn't it? For you and for the one you love. Now imagine you are God (ignore the blasphemy here, it is preposterous, sure, but the prophets do this all the time, and it helps us stretch our hearts) – so imagine that you are God, and each and every human being the beloved. And focus on just one of them. Perhaps yourself, or someone you love. Since they made you into a myth, or a figment of the imagination, the loss has had consequences. They've become harsh, lost, sure there is no one they can trust, so afraid that love is an illusion that they've no willingness to risk, or trust anymore, so hurt by the loss they have no faith in anyone or anything, but are desperate to make some kind of place, some kind of bleak peace out of any means that comes to hand. Despairing of love, trying to settle for being right, or being safe, or having things, or . . . You know your beloved is miserable, and that their only hope is to know what you really are, to have you in their lives, to have your love.

This is the situation to which the prologue of John's gospel speaks. He quotes an old Stoic hymn. In the beginning was the word. This Word (logos in the Greek) is the cause of Creation, God's ability to reach out and share and give meaning to all things. It took on new meaning in the eyes of Christians, as they looked back on the question, "What did Jesus come to reveal?" And John the Evangelist adds to the hymn that John the Baptist came to testify to the true light that was coming into the world. And that when that light came, God's Word, God's logos, he was not recognized, not even by his own people long prepared by the prophets, but that those who did recognize him found power to become children of God. Not their own power, God-initiated power. Power sprung from a new connection in love and trust to the Divine. And this God-revealing glory of him, this Word-of-God-become-flesh, was this, he was full of God-presence for those who walked with him and a transforming God-grounded truth settled into their lives.

They knew after being with him that they weren't alone in the universe, that the power that created was a power that loved and wanted them to love back. They knew that they were loved, that all were loved. They knew that all their desperation, all their lashing out, all their striving against others only ruined the simple joy they could have in life each day. They learned to surrender to that love, to be enfolded in it. Dame Julian of Norwich put it this way in one of her "ecstasies":

God chose to be our mother in all things
and so made the foundation of his work,
most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.
God, the perfect wisdom of all,
arrayed himself in this humble place.
Christ came in our poor flesh
to share a mother's care.
Our mothers bear us for pain and for death;
Our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.
Christ carried us within him in love and travail
until the full time of his passion.
And when all was completed
and he had carried us so for joy,
still all this could not satisfy
the power of his wonderful love. . . .
for the love of Christ works in us

We keep trying to give voice to the wonder God has done; but what does it mean day-to-day? We still have to deal with prejudice, terminal illness, war, homes lost to foreclosure, with mental illness, poverty and addiction.

In the midst of such a world, what did Jesus come to reveal? The Word became flesh so that . . . ? So that we could live in The Presence. God was always with us, but did we know, could we enter in? Jesus is God's invitation, tangible invitation to live in God-presence at each moment and with every circumstance and every person, grounded in God's love for each one, God's hopes and dreams for each

one. Jesus is God's gift of a fresh start. The past is no barrier if we can simply surrender to this love, and learn to set each day before this glory.

Christmas is the perfect moment to ask: have you accepted that invitation? Have you asked Jesus, God's word, to accept you, cleanse you, lead you? Each day you live that way will be a new kind of life. If you live each day with him, keep it up. If you haven't yet, do begin tonight/today!?

Life is difficult, struggles are everywhere, but we are resoundingly not alone. Getting rid of challenges is not the key to peace. We can get on our knees and opt in to God's presence, learn to offer up each day and have our journey transformed. It is as simple as prayer, as hard as surrender, as wonderful as birth.

Royal

Date: December 26, 2010

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm: 147:13-21 Page 805, BCP

13 Worship the LORD, O Jerusalem; *
praise your God, O Zion;
14 For he has strengthened the bars of your gates; *
he has blessed your children within you.
15 He has established peace on your borders; *
he satisfies you with the finest wheat.
16 He sends out his command to the earth, *
and his word runs very swiftly.
17 He gives snow like wool; *
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.
18 He scatters his hail like bread crumbs; *
who can stand against his cold?
19 He sends forth his word and melts them; *
he blows with his wind, and the waters flow.
20 He declares his word to Jacob, *
his statutes and his judgments to Israel.
21 He has not done so to any other nation; *
to them he has not revealed his judgments.
Hallelujah!

New Testament Lesson: Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

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.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Gospel: John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who

believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Sermon

Paul tells us that the Law of Moses was our tutor for a time, our disciplinarian while we were growing up, and it was not a loving parent to us, but hard, and we chafe against it. This isn't just historical. This is the way it is as each child's mind matures. We are given law, we chafe against law, we learn to get along, but resentfully. Some never get any further, or even that far. But we are meant for better. We are meant to be motivated from within. External compulsions can tell us what we may not do, but they cannot tell us what our lives are for. We must know ourselves, we must feel that from within, and the climate of law does not bring it out. It is not when we are compelled by harshness that we come into our own. It is when we know ourselves to be loved, to be destined to live lives of significance. When we are not chafing resentfully against authority in a context of wills, but loved for who we are and who we may be, that is when our possibilities begin to unfold. So Paul says, something changed with the gift of Jesus.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

What we have seen in Jesus changes our vision of God. The great lawgiver becomes the one who sought us out, became human in the person of Jesus to show us it is love, not fear, that God desires. God does not want minions, but children and heirs, proud to live out our heritage, and use the gifts we are given.

But this doesn't happen immediately. We have long chafed against the law. "Should" and "Ought" are often correct and helpful. But they do not give life. The Spirit prompts our hearts to get by their resentment and trust God and say, "Abba" Daddy, Father. And if we do, and we realize that God wants our best for our sake, and so that we can participate in what is new and good and wholesome and hopeful, then our motivation begins to change. We want to be a part of this, that is so much bigger than us. We want to know we have a part in God's healing for the world.

There is a collect for one week in the year, that begins, "Almighty God, whose service is perfect freedom. . ." but a better translation is "whom to serve is to reign." There is a wonderful paradox here. To God we must surrender, or we do not live in grace . . . and yet, this is coming into our own! God

does not create minions, but heirs. When our hearts respond, “Abba!”, Father, in trust and joy, submission turns out to be power, and we come into our own. We can be victors and “Just feel so royal.”

At the pageant, two of the kings made a big impression on me. Derek, who afterward said, “I just feel so royal.” And Charlie Miller, who presented the Frankencense, I think, with his big voice and enthusiastic enunciation. “This is the gift of my country, and I present it with my whole heart.” This is what Christmas brings about, people who can live with their whole hearts. Law is only a tutor, to really live life we need to find that greatness within us. Jesus is God’s gift to set it free so that we live from within, in response to love. The kids are right. We are meant to feel royal. We are meant to live with our whole hearts.

Christ in Our Loneliness

Date: January 2, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

Someone once said that America’s most striking problem is neither political, economic, nor military. It is loneliness. I have been thinking a lot about that this Christmas season. Psychotherapists say that Christmas is a prime time for depression. I suppose it is partly because trees and tinsel, gifts and eggnogs all feed our deep desire to belong and to connect with other people, but the truth is that many of us are quite lonely. It could well have been the Christmas season when W. H. Auden, the great English poet, wrote these words on the back of a menu, while sitting in a New York night club and watching the somewhat frantic gaiety that was going on: “Faces along the bar/ cling there all day./ The lights must never go out/ the music must always play./ Lest we should see where we are/ Lost in a haunted wood/ Children afraid of the night ... “ Perhaps you are not this lonely. If so you are lucky – many of us in this world feel profoundly lonely at times.

One would think that Christmas would push away the darkness of our loneliness, but for so many it only makes it deeper. No wonder, then, that one of the controlling themes of Advent and Christmas is light coming into darkness. Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” John said, “The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” Darkness is where you and I feel alone, lost in a haunted wood, afraid of the night. Darkness is a great symbol. It catches so perfectly that we all, at one time or another, feel lost, separated, lonely. I suppose we all can remember how afraid of the dark we were as small children. I can remember as a five-year-old being so afraid of going down into our unlit cellar at night that my heart would pound. Darkness means being alone, cut off, vulnerable, and this seems to be built into the

psyche of us all. Jesus depicted hell – that greatest of all symbols for loneliness – as being cast into outer darkness. Longfellow once wrote that “... on the ocean of life we pass and speak to each other. Only a look and a voice, then darkness again.” We long to escape this darkness, this loneliness which, in one way or another, at one time or another, touches us all.

And so the Christmas story – indeed the entire Christmas story – comes as hope into the midnight of our isolation. The Christmas story is that God cares enough for us to enter our darkness in person. God chooses to enter into and end our isolation. God cannot rest until you and I know, in the very deepest places of our being, that we are not alone. God is, at every moment, coming into the dark to make connection with us. That is what the Christmas story is telling us. The stable and the animals and the shepherds and the holy family and the angels and the wise men: that is what they are saying to us. That Love has come to be a presence in our life.

And how does it happen? In his letter to Rome, Paul describes Christ as one who “was descended ... according to the flesh.” By this Paul doesn’t just mean that Jesus had tissue, skin, and muscle. He means in the flesh as in human nature, human experience, the human condition. And if anything is true it is that, when Jesus took our flesh, he took on the full depths of the human darkness of loneliness. He knew our suffering for often, the scripture says, he had nowhere to lay his head. He knew our human struggles, for he fought temptation alone in the wilderness. He felt rejection by close ones, for he was betrayed for a handful of silver coins. He knew what it was like to have colleagues run away when the chips were down, for his disciples did just that. He took every bit of our loneliness right into his heart, when he cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But more than just experiencing our lives long ago, Jesus still comes to us “according to the flesh.” For that is how we meet him again and again in our lives, as he is incarnated anew in the flesh of those of us who carry grace to each other. Don Wardlaw, preaching on the Protestant Hour some years ago, told a wonderful story about this, which sticks in my memory. Wardlaw’s father had been a minister too, and one day his father’s church custodian – a man named George – had collapsed on hearing of his wife’s death from a sudden heart attack. When the elder Wardlaw arrived at George’s home, he found him numb, lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. His father said nothing at the moment, but just pulled up a rocker and sat by the bed. He lit up a cigar and started rocking. George, the custodian, drifted off into a soothing sleep. Later George told Don Wardlaw, at the elder minister’s funeral, that, on the day his wife died, he had awakened in the dark and reached out for her. When he felt the empty side of the bed, he felt a most terrible agony of loss and loneliness. But George said, just as the pain of isolation had become almost unbearable, he caught, in the corner of his eye, the arcing red glow of his friend and minister’s cigar, as he quietly rocked. And George said, “I got through that night because I was not alone. Your father was there.”

St. Paul says that we baptized folks are the Body of Christ, and this is what he means. Multiply this simple human kindness by all of us who are in Christ’s family, his Body, and you begin to see what it means for Christ to come into our world according to the flesh. You and I get through the long, lonely nights that come into our lives because – when we get it right – we are with each other, being Christ to

each other, in moments of darkness and emptiness. Christ comes to us and ministers to us, of course, in the Word of scripture and in the bread and wine of communion, but mostly Christ comes to us in each other's flesh, each other's person, each other's touch. Perhaps, Christ came to some of us in the flesh of a son or daughter who, at Christmas time, reached out in a longed for act of reconciliation. Perhaps Christ came to some of us in our husband or wife, who loved us even when we were acting selfishly. Perhaps Christ came to us in the flesh of a friend, who really listened and really heard what we were trying to say. Perhaps Christ came to us in the flesh of a kind person at work, who broke through the isolation and loneliness that can be such a part of our workplaces. Perhaps Christ came in a card from one long-loved and a long ways away. God reaches out to us in Christ ministering through us in many, many ways and through many, many people – to lighten our darkness and to touch our hearts.

That wise Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, one of the spiritual giants of the 20th century, once wrote a prayer that speaks to me when I am feeling lonely and need to trust. Let me close with this prayer: "Dear God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. But I believe this: I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. I hope I have that desire in everything I do. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it at the time. Therefore I will trust you always, for though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not be afraid. Because I know you will never leave me to face my troubles alone."

Amen.

Free to Respond to Our Call

Date: January 23, 2011

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: Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm: 27:1, 5-13 Page 617, BCP

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon

In 1961, fifty years ago this Tuesday, on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle, young Stuart Allen Schlegel was ordained a priest in the Diocese of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines by Bishop Lyman Cunningham Ogilby. And what a wonderful story has grown from that beginning, although, of course, that is not its beginning. There is a long road of listening and being questioned and heard before one is ordained.

Chris DiMaio has just finished a diocesan project, an assignment that Michael Hudson and Bill Kell have also completed in the past. He has been a member of a Deanery Commission on Ministry, and met for a couple of months with this group and a woman with a call, a call to serve Christ, to help her come to a clear understanding, is that call to be a lay person, or a priest or a deacon?

All of this is about the question of being called. No one should be ordained because they want to be ordained. Or because others want them ordained. We have to be convinced that it is God's idea.

Now this is profound, and we take it very seriously, but it is also the most ordinary thing in Christian life. Every Christian does what they do each day, not because they want to, or because other people want them to, but because they believe what they are doing fulfills their baptismal promises, and brings glory to God, and thereby does the world good. This is so ordinary that we do it without thinking, at least until we feel something is wrong. There is no question when you are eating breakfast or getting ready for work, or saying your prayers. But there are things that cause us to question, and pray, moments when we feel called to stop doing something, or to see something in a new way, and even moments when we feel pulled in a new direction and we need to ask God whence it comes. "Is this from you, Lord?" "Is this an adventure, and a part of our journey? Where will we go, what will I learn?"

The story of Paul's conversion is well-known. Less well known is that he had to go away and think about it, quietly, for some time. How could his life make sense, how did all the pieces of it contribute to the adventure he was on now? Instead of persecuting a group of his own Chosen People when they dared to follow Jesus, his new calling was to show all people that in Jesus, they were Chosen, too, and included in all God's plans. He had come by a strange path to his life's mission, but he could see God's hand in it.

And on the day he wrote this bit of 1st Corinthians, his calling is being tested. Here's his pride and joy, this congregation of non-Jews, of gentiles, in Corinth. They have fallen for Christ and they are resplendent in his mind with evidence in their lives of God's love and transformation. He gives thanks for them, every day, quite literally. It means that much to him that they have become one with all God's people, in Christ.

Then he hears reports that their unity is impaired and he is sick about it. They are proudly claiming distinctions, status, superiority to one another. He sees this as poison. Their only standing is in Christ. He does not stand on eloquence, or rhetoric, or degrees, or worldly repute. His hope is in Christ, and if that feels vulnerable, too much putting all your eggs in one basket, if it feels foolish, he begs them to be fools. Trusting in something else only stands in the way of the gospel experience. It empties the cross of Christ of its power.

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

It isn't about who baptized you, or what school of theology you subscribe to. It is about the love of Christ. And Epiphany is about watching to see what God is up to, not the dazzling things others may do and make us feel jealous or small. Keep your eyes on God, and if you feel vulnerable trusting in what looks to the world as something foolish, so be it. God's love and forgiveness, the Cross of Christ, is a greater power to make us whole than all the other powers combined.

I don't know what Fr. Stu experienced when he came to the decision to be ordained. I am absolutely sure that when Peter and Andrew, James and John left their nets their families had something to say about their foolishness.

And it is always a calling. Christ finds us as we are. Begins with us where we are in our lives. But the Spirit of God in us dreams dreams, and when we listen we begin to see new possibilities, not grounded in ego, but in love. Yearnings present themselves, and even if they seem to us to be foolish, just a little surrender keeps us listening, moving along with God until we have the courage to own the yearning, to mention it to a member of our prayer group, to test it in some other way, to begin to explore.

Be sure, God is not finished with you, yet, but yearns to be manifest in you as his light shines in Jesus. Never be afraid of being foolish for Christ, be afraid of being too worldly wise.

The vestry returns in this spirit, I think, from our retreat last weekend. We worked hard, and in a sense, playfully. We had the task of giving voice to the yearnings reported to us by so many of you in individual meetings and house meetings in recent months. Giving voice to a whole body is challenging work, yet they gave themselves to it. At one time there we eight competing proposals on the walls at the retreat

center, built around a variety of metaphors, band of disciples, font, oasis, Ark: ways of expressing the emerging vision for this parish 2011 through 2013.

It is a sense of playfulness and vision, a particular kind of foolishness that I think we need to look ahead together, and make a change of direction now and then to respond to the Holy Spirit.

When true simplicity is gained/ to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed/ to turn, turn will be our delight/ 'till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

In your personal calling, in our call as a parish and beyond, may God release you from worldly wisdom and give you the freedom to be foolish when Jesus calls.

For Fr. Stu Schlegel: BCP p.534 from the Ordination of a Priest:

May he exalt you, O Lord, in the midst of your people; offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to you; boldly proclaim the gospel of salvation; and rightly administer the sacraments of the New Covenant. Make him a faithful pastor, a patient teacher, and a wise councilor. Grant that in all things he may serve without reproach, so that your people may be strengthened and your Name glorified in all the world. All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever.

People of the Flesh, People of the Spirit

Date: February 13, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; 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: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8 Page 763, BCP

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Gospel: Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your

whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Sermon

. . . because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that . . . we may please you both in will and deed . . .

` from the collect for the 6th Sunday after the Epiphany

- I. According to the flesh vs. According to the Spirit
 - a. Signs of kata sarx
 - i. The Church has often been very shallow and negative about the human body, about sex, about femininity as well. But “according to the flesh” in Paul has nothing to do with all that, no matter how it has been misinterpreted by people who were threatened by their own sexuality or by strong women. We must work hard in the Church to speak positively about the human body God created, positively about wholesome sexuality, positively about women in leadership. And, we need to rescue some of the phrases in our heritage that have been twisted, and get their richness back for our soul’s health. And what “according to the flesh” means is “being ruled by your desires” or “trying to get your own way”.
 - ii. The signs of living this way are right there in our Scriptures: Today’s: jealousy, strife, the general inability to get along with one another.
 - iii. Galatians 5 where Paul spells it out: Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,* drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

- b. Signs of kata pneuma
 - i. Unity and common purpose (in today's passage)
 - ii. Galatians 5: the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.
- c. And you see, Paul's teaching is that these things are not caused by will-power alone. These are the signs of, the symptoms of, the fruit of our basic walk of faith. Do we walk with our desires before us or choose friendship with God?
 - i. One who walks humbly with God, who depends on God moment to moment, who knows themselves beloved of God, cultivates one kind of fruit.
 - ii. One who feels all alone in the world and acts as if God is not there cultivates another kind of fruit, because they must get what they want from an uncaring cosmos.
 1. This is practical atheism. To the degree that we ignore God and put our trust in ourselves, to that degree we become more alone and more desperate.
 2. And yet the opposite is also true. You chose whether to offer life to God, God grows the good fruit. We cannot do it ourselves. The collect captures this when it says that we were never made to live on our own, or to produce fruit out of our own strength.
- d. The Message puts it like this: It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cut throat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. And of the other the Message says: But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives much as fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

- i. If we understand this faith orientation as basic, I think it isn't too hard to figure out what Jesus is talking about in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Murder, adultery, divorce and the taking of an oath. Jesus takes each ancient scripture and instead of treating them like laws he makes them about the people in our lives, he makes them about seeing those people through God's eyes, with respect and love.
- e. He says don't resist murder by will-power. See anger and hatred, yours or someone else's, as an opportunity for healing, and overcome evil with love.
- f. Don't resist adultery with just will-power. Women were property of their husbands, yet Jesus commands that they be seen as persons. This is a matter of the inner life, of walking with God.
- g. And divorce: Jesus wants to see marriage as about a person, about a covenant with a person, once again not about property rights, but about striving for a union, a pursuit of holiness that is fit for the kingdom.
- h. And taking oaths - this isn't about swearing, profanity, those ugly attitudes that come pouring out sometimes. This is about making promises, signing contracts, having the integrity that when we say 'yes' we mean 'yes' and when we say 'no' we mean 'no' and we know, in our own hearts, that our word is our bond, that we aren't keeping one truth for one setting and another for other friends. It is about taking ourselves seriously before God.

All of this is not to say that we don't fail in these things and need to be forgiven. But, Jesus was trying to teach people what it felt like to be beloved. And how people acted when they felt beloved.

He was trying to create a new normal. This is what is right and good and normal for human beings, but that normal has been lost and what is common now, he was saying, is abnormal and quite wrong. No news there, except that he insisted that God's reign had arrived, and beloved-ness was possible. Therefore, people couldn't be treated as objects, and life couldn't be negotiated by rules. It is about love at its core. About love from the root.

Are you beloved? Are those sitting around you beloved? Are the folks at home beloved? The folks where you go to school, the folks you play with, work with? Are you beloved? Do you know this and trust it? That is what we mean when we say, "We believe in God the Father Almighty. . ." and we tell the story about a God who would stop at nothing to rescue us and bring us into the life of God. The creed means we know we are beloved.

And do you feel beloved sometimes? In prayer, on a walk, with a friend, with a child, do you feel it at work in you, around you, sometimes through you? You are beloved.

It is that partnership with Love, the Love at the root of everything, that Love that came to rescue us in Jesus – it is in partnership with that Love that we are meant to live, and that is what it means to live "according to the Spirit." " God is loving those about you. Join in. And know you are beloved.

On Being Perfect

Date: February 20, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

I once heard someone describe what he called “The Five Rules of American Life.” I never forgot them, because they were so scary and yet so close to what is true for many of us. I mentioned them to you once before in a sermon, but I am bringing them up again today because they relate so powerfully to the culminating line in today’s gospel.

The five rules are these: Rule #1: You must be perfect. Rule #2: If you aren’t perfect, you must get perfect fast. Rule #3: If you can’t get perfect, you must pretend to be perfect. Rule #4: If you can’t seem to be perfect, then get out of the group. And, Rule #5: If you can’t seem to be perfect and you won’t get out, then at least have the decency to be deeply ashamed.

There you have them. Five rules of life that can – and do – kill life and joy for many, many people. Do you recognize them? If you are like me, they have a dreadful resonance with much that society has taught us from our childhood up. How many of us have felt the terrible, terrible pain of not being perfect or even seeming perfect, and yet feeling, on some crazy insane logic such as those five rules, that we had to be perfect. The rules were applied to many of us as children, and all too many of us have internalized some or all of them as adults. The rules are really out there, and they are a formula, not just for hypocrisy, but for misery, about as bad as bad news can get. My witty Jesuit friend, Tom Weston, says that sometimes he feels like introducing himself to strangers by saying, “Hello, I am Tom, and I’m so sorry!”

The rules are bad news. And yet, in our gospel this morning – our gospel, which means our good news – Jesus tells us to be perfect, like our Father in heaven is perfect. How many people have heard that passage as the Bible itself invoking something like those terrible five rules? Are our scriptures calling for an inevitable load of guilt? How many churches say, in effect, be perfect – seem to have no faults – or you don’t belong here? Thank God, St. John’s isn’t like that, but I have seen many congregations and felt their cultures, and I tell you that lots of them are quietly, subtly just like that. No wonder that many outside the Church see Christians as a bunch of hypocrites. Which of us is perfect? Where is this congregation of flawless people? What in the world sort of “good news” is a gospel lesson that says, “Have no flaws, just as your Father in heaven is flawless and perfect”?

Well, the truth is that the gospel says no such thing. “Perfect” in English is simply not a very good translation of the Greek word that is in the original passage. The word “perfect” means to me, when I hear it, “flawless, without blemish,” and I am sure that’s what it means to you, when you hear it. “Flawless, without fault,” is certainly what the word “perfect” means in “The Five Rules of American Life.” But that is not – repeat not – what Jesus says we are to be. When he says, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect,” he is using a Greek word that means not “flawless,” but “be whole, complete, finished, sound, healthy.” This passage is in the Sermon on the Mount, and in all of the early parts of this sermon, Jesus had spelled out what whole and healthy means. It means turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving your cloak as well as your shirt. It means being loving. “Be loving, be compassionate – as your Father in heaven is compassionate.” And then, in God’s eyes and God’s logic, you will be perfect. With all your flaws! With all your blemishes! Now, being loving and compassionate isn’t easy, but at least it is possible. The quest to be a loving human being, a compassionate human being – one who cares and feels, and one who reaches out to others in caring and feeling – this is not some light, simple task. But it is not, like the five rules, simply impossible, simply a sentence to slavery. We can be loving. There is no way we can be flawless.

So, you see, it really is good news. And we need to hear that good news. It is true that much of our culture, our society, pushes something like those five terrible rules, and often they find their most subtle voice right within us. They are so often the voice of our inner critic, the voice of our inner selves, saying, “You are flawed and no good. You are not across-the-board A+, so feel bad about yourself.” That voice, at one time or another, tries to haunt us all. It does me, and I would bet my World Series tickets (if I had any) that a voice just like it sometimes haunts you too. But we must not buy into it, allow it to enslave us. Let me quote Fr. Tom again. He says that we all need to put a picture of Abraham Lincoln on our walls, to remind us that a century and a half ago he freed the slaves. Tom says, “Lots of us haven’t gotten that news yet.”

So we need to hear the gospel, the good news, and we need to believe it. It is what we need to buy into, and if we do, it is a liberating message. In the world as Christ sees it, and as Christians we can see it too, you don’t have to be perfect, in the sense of being flawless. You don’t have to become flawless. You don’t have to pretend to be flawless. You don’t have to get out of the group – not this group, anyway – if you can’t seem flawless. And, last and best of all, you don’t have to be ashamed. You just don’t have to carry around a load of shame. This is the gospel, proclaimed to you and me as flawed people, and this is fantastically good news. It just may be as good as any news in this world.

So be perfect. Seek perfection. But let it be the perfection which is like our Father in heaven, who is loving, understanding, forgiving, and always compassionate. Let the “no-fault” kind of perfection go. It can be helpful as a goal, but not as a rule. No one you know, including yourself, is ever going to be flawless. We don’t have to expect it of others, and – wonder of wonders, joy of joys – we don’t have to expect it of ourselves. That is the truth, and, believe me, that truth really will set you free.

Amen.

Keep Your Eyes on Jesus

Date: March 6, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; 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: Exodus 24:12-18

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Psalm 2 Page 586, BCP or Psalm 99 Page 728, BCP

New Testament Lesson: 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Sermon

Let's talk about prayer and vision. The collect today is pretty wonderful:

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory . . .

If we can behold by faith the light of his countenance, we can be strengthened to bear our cross – Good! I can use that strength. . .

Eternity shines in this world, the divine is visible. Where? - in the face of Jesus. If we can put our trust in that face, see God shine there, we'll have strength, we'll be transformed. Keep your eyes on Jesus. One of our principle forms of prayer is adoration. Even before gratitude, even before praise, keep your eyes on Jesus, and God will use your trust to change your life.

There on the mountain in today's gospel, Peter and James and John and Jesus had a vision – a vision simply to be cherished, to grow them from within. They saw Jesus transfigured so that they saw through him, saw the divine, saw eternity right there in a man with whom they had traveled and camped and quarreled while they talked of God's dream for the world. And day by day before this happened, and day by day after this vision, the world quarreled with him, and day by day the disciples misunderstood him or tried to guide him into safer paths. And even so, this vision was working within them, Peter and James and John, helping them come to some kind of understanding, who is this man? Really, who is he?

This is a mountain-top experience if ever there was one, and they have seen a vision, and they are told not to tell of it when they go down the mountain. Just keep it. Live with it. And God's voice speaks to them, in the midst of all the quarreling chapter after chapter, in this interlude on the mountain retreat, God says, "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him." So we can adore. And we can listen to him.

It is a skill we don't much have in the modern world, to listen for God to speak and then to ponder in our hearts what it might mean and where it might take us and live with it for a while and see what it kindles.

It is the nature of the gospel life that God has vision for us, if only our eyes are open. Some of Jesus' favorite phrases were, "Let those who have eyes see!" And, "Let those who have ears hear!" So we are in the midst of a time of listening and of visioning. Your vestry and many others have been through an intense process of last year setting goals, evaluating progress, individual meetings, house meetings for all we could involve, and hard work re-considering what we know about the parish in light of what we learned. We have a new vision for the next three years, an inspiring direction to go with our common efforts, as we go about our various ministries.

You will have as many opportunities to participate in the work and the growth as you are willing to have. And I want to say a word or two about HOW to participate, so that this vision process serves our Lord well:

- Work with those who lead. Work with them. You and I both know that we don't all move in lock-step. We are more like that old thing about herding cats. We have many ministries, many interests, many gifts, and all of these work together to make up the Body of Christ. This is as it should be; except that instead of being like the cats, we could all look up to such vision as we've been given, and looking at it, we can all, in our own ways, move toward it, allow some things to happen, contribute our bit to the cause. Think of Peter and James and John, who have seen the vision of Jesus' face shining from within, shining from eternity, and they have to ponder that in silence for a while, and wonder what God is showing them.
- Move into an experimental mode as a parish. Each ministry area will need to try some new things, set goals a little differently, and especially worship, children and families, adult education, and newcomers are going to be bold.
- Let yourself experience new things as opportunities. Of course, if we do something new and you like it, no problem. But if you don't or you aren't so sure, then take it under advisement, not in a

knee-jerk response mode, but in discernment: does this give life? Does this give consolation? Is it of God? How does it affect different people, for whom is it a blessing, and for whom a struggle?

- It is easy to mistake our personal tastes for ‘good’ ‘bad’ and ‘the Spirit’s presence.’ But St. Ignatius, our best teacher of discernment, taught that many things, decided in a godly way, still must be tested, and evaluated after the fact. So give things time, let God evaluate them inside you. Maybe it seems great at first and doesn’t wear well, maybe the reverse.
- Finally and most important, pray. Bathe it in prayer, a kind of “live with it, soak in it, lift it up to heaven and ask about it, ask for guidance, ask for inspiration” kind of prayer. Lift it to Jesus, and ask what he thinks of it, watch him, listen to him. I’m serious about this, this is our greatest tool for seeing that, as we journey, we continue to be turned back into God’s path. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Today’s collect says,

God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory. . .

We want this parish to be strengthened, don’t we? And to be transformed, more and more, into his likeness from glory to glory, don’t we? Just as we want that for ourselves. It can only happen by prayer.

Lent 2, Year A

Date: March 20, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

[Old Testament Lesson: Gen. 12:1-4a](#)

[Psalm: 121 ; New Testament Lesson: Rom. 4:1-5,13-17](#)

[Gospel: Jn. 3:1-17](#)

Sermon

A friend of a friend writes from Japan:

Once again I want to write to you about what is happening here. The TV news is frightening beyond belief. In fact, this entire phenomenon seems totally surreal. Beyond the edges of one's wildest imagination. Yes, the devastation continues, as do deep concerns over the nuclear fallout. But I continue picking through the rubble of this experience to find flickers of hope and powerful experiences of beauty. I am very blessed to have wonderful friends who are helping me a lot. Since my shack is even more worthy of that name, I am now staying at a friend's home. We share supplies like water, food and a kerosene heater. We sleep lined up in one room, eat by candlelight, share stories. It is warm, friendly, and beautiful.

During the day we help each other clean up the mess in our homes. People sit in their cars, looking at news on their navigation screens, or line up to get drinking water when a source is open. If someone has water running in their home, they put out a sign so people can come to fill up their jugs and buckets.

It's utterly amazingly that where I am there has been no looting, no pushing in lines. People leave their front door open, as it is safer when an earthquake strikes. People keep saying, "Oh, this is how it used to be in the old days when everyone helped one another."

Quakes keep coming. Last night they struck about every 15 minutes.

Sirens are constant and helicopters pass overhead often.

We got water for a few hours in our homes last night, and now it is for half a day. Electricity came on this afternoon. Gas has not yet come on. But all of this is by area. Some people have these things, others do not.

No one has washed for several days. We feel grubby, but there are so much more important concerns than that for us now. I love this peeling away of non-essentials. Living fully on the level of instinct, of intuition, of caring, of what is needed for survival, not just of me, but of the entire group.

There are unexpected touches of beauty, like the silence at night. No cars. No one out on the streets. And the heavens at night are scattered with stars. I usually can see about two, but now the whole sky is filled. The mountains [around] Sendai are solid and with the crisp air we can see them silhouetted against the sky magnificently.

And the Japanese themselves are so wonderful. I come back to my shack to check on it each day . . . now to send this e-mail since the electricity is on, and I find food and water left in my entranceway. I have no idea from whom, but it is there. Old men in green hats go from door to door checking to see if everyone is OK. People talk to complete strangers asking if they need help. I see no signs of fear. Resignation, yes, but fear or panic, no.

They tell us we can expect aftershocks, and even other major quakes, for another month or more. And we are getting constant tremors, rolls, shaking, rumbling. I am blessed in that I live in a part of Sendai that is a bit elevated, a bit more solid than other parts. So, so far this area is better off than others. Last night my friend's husband came in from the country, bringing food and water. Blessed again.

In one of the shelters junior high school students got paper and paints and made a large bright, energetic sign that said, "To have life is profound joy." It was hung high overhead so everyone could see it and be encouraged by the words.

Somehow at this time I realize from direct experience that there is indeed an enormous Cosmic evolutionary step that is occurring all over the world right at this moment. And somehow as I experience the events happening now in Japan, I can feel my heart opening very wide. My brother asked me if I felt so small because of all that is happening. I don't. Rather, I feel as part of something happening that's much larger than myself. This wave of birthing (worldwide) is hard, and yet magnificent.

I read this excerpt of a letter from a woman I know only as Anne because I believe it has bearing on our readings this morning. Junior high school students in the midst of rubble, unimaginable loss and devastation, write "to have life is profound joy". To have life. To have the sense that your life has been spared. To have the opportunity, and the responsibility, of being truly, and deeply alive.

Nicodemus is old, he is respected, he is wise. He comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, when no one will see him, but he comes. There is a spark of hope in his heart. He asks, "how can anyone be born after having grown old?" When Jesus tells Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit, this is the kind of aliveness he's talking about. Catastrophic tragedy is not a prerequisite. It's just that sometimes we can see light more clearly against the darkness. There is nothing good about the tragedy in Japan. But in the midst of this darkest of catastrophes we see humanity's capacity for self-giving and hope, and the will, even now, to begin life anew. These are gifts of faith. We see them as gifts of God, and the heart of Jesus' message of the Kingdom.

Abram and Sarai, both in their 70's, leave their home and everything they've ever known because God told them to get up and go. Among the Celtic saints, whom we celebrate today, Brendan the Navigator set out across the ocean with 60 companions – no charts, no maps, no knowledge of what was out there

– because God told him to go. The Bible is one long story of God’s saying to people, “you can’t stay here, you know; you’ll have to move on”. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the Hebrews, Jesus, the disciples, Paul.

Indeed, human history is the story of those who picked up and moved on somewhere else to a new life. Faith is the trust in God’s providence and care that enables us to let go of what no longer serves, of what is dead or dying, and to begin anew. Sometimes that is wrenchingly hard to do, and we must leave behind people and a world that we love and that gave us life. I think this is part of Nicodemus’ concern. How do you break from the habits and convictions of a lifetime? Johannine language is long on mystery and short on practical advice. Nicodemus asks about obstetrics and Jesus tells him about the wind. But what words would you use to talk about the power of the Spirit and the paradox of death and resurrection?

This is also the passage, John 3:16, that has been used so often to explain the Cross: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” We see it on posters at football games as a message of justification. What if we look at this passage in a slightly different way? What if God gave Jesus to us as a gift? Not just his death, but his living, breathing self, indeed, God’s own self, to be one of us, to live among us, for us to love, to learn from, and to enjoy forever. Sinfulness and misfortune and organic life being what they are, death and terrible loss are part of what it means to be human. But, as Jesus said, God did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. Not to blame us for falling short, but to love us into eternal life. That gift of God’s own self is in companionship with us forever.

We don’t know the trajectory of Nicodemus’ faith life. We just know one thing. After Jesus was laid in the tomb it was Nicodemus who came with aloes and perfumes to anoint the body of this young prophet he so admired.

Where will our faith journey take us? Can we trust a God who allows earthquakes and tsunamis to happen? That’s a tough one. Can we walk with Jesus to the Cross as well as with Abraham and Sarai out of Ur? Lent is a time for engaging new life more deeply, about risking new levels of trust. We would so much rather have resurrection without death. The empty tomb at Easter is the last word, but it doesn’t make sense unless we’ve made the journey with Abram and with Jesus.

Addendum: Here’s another letter from Anne; well worth reading.

But alongside of the ongoing horrific news we have started hearing stories of a positive nature. They may be small and subtle, but they are emerging. A doctor, for example, who lost his home and clinic, went to live in an evacuee shelter. He immediately saw the tremendous medical needs there, so began treating patients to the best of his ability. A nurse came in by helicopter to offer her services. During her interview she said, "People must overcome this crisis. We cannot give up."

Likewise a restaurant owner, who also lost his home, but not his business, opened up shop and offered hot bowls of noodle soup to evacuees for free. "We must help one another," was his only comment. Indeed, a friend in Tokyo wrote this to me in an e-mail. "I know that every Japanese people can exercise

their best to help others in such serious circumstances and you can rely on their kindness. That is our culture. Of course, I am ready to support you anything you need, so please don't hesitate, but let me know whatever I can support you."

In evacuation centers there are puppet shows for children. "It's to ease their minds," my friend explained to me. "That is very important." And for the Japanese, one's state of mind often carries more weight than facts. That is because we have some semblance of control over our mind, no matter what the outer circumstances may be.

On local TV stations time is allotted to read messages of people seeking family members. We comfort one another as best as we can. We still say, "Gambarimashou" (We must keep up our fighting spirit). We see shots on TV of family members reuniting, of long lines of people waiting to use free phone service to call home and friends. We see a lot of tears. But so much comfort, so much support.

The city's basic infrastructure has collapsed, but people are working round the clock to get things back into some sort of normalcy. Water came first in big trucks. Then in some areas it was on after a day. Electricity is also slowly coming back on. Gas will not be available for another month or so because of excessive damage to the pipes. We are all dreaming of a bath, of just being able to wash a bit. But as one woman in a shelter said, "I was so cold at night, but everyone else was, too. So, that gives me courage." In that context a bath seems so minor.

Buses have resumed on some routes. Some food shops are open for a few hours a day. I noticed a shop open with flowers for graves, for shrines and temples so that the souls of the long ago and recently deceased may have a touch of earthly beauty in heaven.

There is so much support and solidarity. I want to close with another e-mail from a friend who is a university teacher. It, too, is an excellent manifestation of the truly remarkable Japanese "kokoro" (heart and soul).

"I have been trying to find out the situations of some students and friends whom I lost contact with since the earthquake and tsunami attacked this area.

"There are still many students staying and living on campus. Some lost their houses and the others are not sure if their families are OK. When I met them, I just couldn't find right word to cheer them up.

"Today was supposed to be a graduation day which was postponed and might be canceled. When I saw the students at the campus housing this morning, they served me a special breakfast that the juniors cooked for the seniors to celebrate the day. The meal was cold, but really special. I won't forget the taste of it. I am convinced that my students will overcome this tragedy with the positive attitude. I intend to emulate them."

With Love, Anne

Unleavened Selves

Date: April 21, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. [Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.] This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Psalm 116: 1, 10-17 Page 759, BCP

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Sermon

1 Cor 5: 6 Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? 7 Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

As the blood of a lamb protected the Israelites from the plague of the first-born while they were in Egypt, and they have always remembered it as the moment of their deliverance from slavery, so now the Christ has made an offering of himself, a life given in every way with integrity and purpose and love with such godliness that God resurrects him to be the first-born in the reign of God.

We have a phrase we say as we break the bread at Holy Communion, that moment we call the “fraction” or breaking of the bread. Our Scripture for the fraction is: “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast.” It is from 1 Cor. 5, and it has a particular meaning in this place, a Maundy Thursday kind of meaning.

1st Corinthians was written to a boastful congregation, full of competition among members to be most powerful in the things of God. You can forget the gospel relieves us of fear and alienation. You can even use the things of the Spirit to try to be better than other people. How we can twist things to make them about us, instead of trusting ourselves to the love of God!

Being estranged from God and ourselves and others, we try to fill in the hole in our hearts. We find all kinds of ways to make ourselves acceptable. We build up our reputations or tear others down. We measure ourselves against standards, we talk of self-esteem. God wants us enthusiastic, that is, full of God, knowing we are loved. Choosing to justify ourselves instead of dwelling in God’s love is like passing up the gas pump and filling your car with the garden hose.

Paul was saying to them how silly and dangerous this was. How easily they could lose sight of their risen life in Christ if they made this all about them, instead of about all people because Christ has loved and lived and risen for all people. He says to them that in the Passover Feast, which for us is Holy Communion, we celebrate Christ as the Lamb of God, the main part of the meal, and that we are the bread, the unleavened bread at the Passover. Why unleavened? Because, he says, yeast is so powerful, a little bit of it can make any bit of dough get all puffed up. He uses puffed up to mean “full of itself”.

We are supposed to know the rest of the sentence. So, I’ve put it back in our musical setting. Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast/ not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. We are supposed to be simple, genuine and unpretentious!

Now when we look at Jesus on the night before he died, we are puzzled. Or maybe in awe. Watch the way he acts when he knows that the angry powers are looming over him, the way he keeps being what he has always been, something of a rebel against any oppressor, a teacher of dignity to the downtrodden, who counsels truth-telling but not violence, who teaches us to love our enemies and hold them accountable to their responsibilities at the same time, afraid of no one, hating no one, steady in his message not only in word but in his doing as well.

But this rebel, this master and Lord of disciples, this messiah is not puffed up, not full of himself. Since his disciples can't understand what he is saying to them in words, he makes himself a parable. Before he says the wine of the meal is a new covenant in his blood, he kneels on the floor to wash Peter's feet, all their feet, as if he were their servant.

We are supposed to be simple, genuine and unpretentious. We are invited to the freedom to be simple, genuine and unpretentious. Whatever our competence, whatever our place in the world, however small or great we think we might be, we are invited to find our hope and our home in Christ, and secure there, knowing that we are safe in that love now and forever, we have the gift of using all our gifts as we are called to use them, and yet to be in this world with humility. The freedom is amazing.

'Tis the gift to be simple. We are miserable when we are puffed up. So let us keep the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The Forgiveness of Sins

Date: April 24, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, who made this most holy [morning] to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

New Testament Lesson: Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Psalms 118: 1-2, 14-24 Page 760, BCP

- 22 The same stone which the builders rejected *
has become the chief cornerstone.
- 23 This is the LORD'S doing, *
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
- 24 On this day the LORD has acted; *
we will rejoice and be glad in it.

New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-4

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.

Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Sermon

Have you ever imagined that you were one of Jesus' disciples? One of the men or women who traveled with him, who hosted him, who took part in his teaching missions and table fellowship? I'm going to ask you to let me be a disciple this morning, to come with me on an imaginative journey, and let me put my experience of Jesus into the mouth of one of Jesus' first disciples, just an experiment. But after I read the gospel lesson, I so wished we could get Matthew as our guest preacher. Since he wasn't available, I thought I'd try to stand in for him. If Matthew could have come today, I think he might have begun like this:

Jesus' teaching, his prayer, his way of being with people, it gave you a new sense of community. Being with him you began to believe that people could love each other, that life didn't have to be angry and brutish, even though the Romans ruled us. People could live with dignity – Jesus gave dignity to everyone, and more than that. He expected the best from everyone, you could feel him waiting for it, he invited us to give it. Challenged us sometimes, always hoping we'd show some humanity, always hoping we'd rise to the occasion. And he thought every moment was an occasion - he thought God was at work all the time. He'd say it right out, "The reign of God has come among you." And that is how you felt.

– That's how it all began.–

He kept giving people to each other. We found together a new community, a table fellowship, something that gave new meaning to the word *family*. You never knew who he would bring to the table (it became a joke after a while); it was always your table – he didn't have one. The day he brought me, a tax collector – that was a scene, I tell you! That's what he saw God doing, he said, so he did it. What an extraordinary collection of strays, from the highest to the lowest.

And this extended community worked. He had a name for it. He called it "the forgiveness of sins." It wasn't about what you had done wrong, it was about how we mistrusted one another, it was about our hostility: clans, villages, parties, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, revolutionaries and collaborators, the wealthy, the merchants, the lawless, the quiet people salt of the earth, the poor. He overcame that anger by his example, by his teaching, by sharing a meal.

If God could love us all just as we were, just as the Master did, then it felt almost reasonable. He called it the forgiveness of sins. And it made us think through everything. Instead of picking fights with people who were different, I could listen to them when he was around. I'd had a lot of conflict, I was a tax collector for the Romans, I used anger as a shield. Instead of avoiding difficult people, or those who looked down on me, around him I had time to be with them. Instead of being angry with myself, I felt that if Jesus could love me, and he said the Father did, that all kinds of things were possible, and I wanted to please him, I wanted to be like him, I wanted to help others feel what he made me feel. I'd never been like that before.

All that violence in myself, wanting to put enemies in their place, needing to justify myself, wanting my crowd to be right, wanting vengeance to sweep our enemies away – Jesus let that all go. He showed a mighty anger sometimes, warning the powerful against using people, the Pharisees against hypocrisy, but always hoping for change, always warning against violence. He saw the Father reaching out to everyone, he said, wanting to gather us all under his wings as a hen gathers her chicks, and Jesus wanted the same. He seemed to believe there was hope for anybody. I had reason to be glad about that! Sure, there were lots of people who didn't like him or his teaching. Some of them hated him, thought he was a threat, because he didn't hate whatever party they were against. He didn't even hate the Romans! But he didn't hate the people who hated him, either. I think he ached for them.

And even when they arrested him, he was just himself. He didn't change one bit, not for the High Priest who lied about him, not for Pilate who wanted a way out, not for the crowd who asked Pilate to pardon a revolutionary and condemn a peacemaker, not for the mockers at the foot of his cross. He stood his ground, expecting the best from each of them, showing with his courage what it does mean to be human, what it means to be divine. "Father, forgive them . . .", he prayed. Glory!! Even with the thieves who died beside him, he was the very gift of love, promising even then, in his own desolation, that God had a place in heaven for a dying thief. What humanity! What glory!

He was himself. Not us. Most of us ran away, some of us denied we knew him, some of us crept to the foot of the cross when it seemed safe, when he didn't look so much like a threat to anybody. We, who had been so enthusiastic while he lived, couldn't stand with him, our courage failed us, we hadn't the spirit to think about the reign of God then. And then it was gone. We thought it died with him. Those were terrible days. Self-reproach came back with a vengeance. He picked me up when I was hated, a collaborator with the Romans, telling myself I was just trying to get by, and how did I repay him? Despair took us then, much worse than before, because we knew what we had lost. And then he rose. What else can we say? We saw him, spoke to him and he to us. Lots of us, in

different ways and places. We had the chance again to decide if we wanted to go back to justifying ourselves, or if we wanted to be his love in the world. He greeted us, in spite of our betrayals. He looked us in the eye. That's what he'd always done. He sent us. After that it was up to us what kind of life we wanted to live. I know I couldn't go back to tax collecting. A new life was ours for the living. God had adopted us into Jesus' new family, and we could bring that experience wherever we went, to anyone who wanted it. Alleluia!

Bright Sunday

Date: May 1, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

I was happy to read in a Newsweek survey, some years ago, that of all the activities people want to find in heaven laughter ranked near the top of the list. Only a small minority was opposed to laughter in heaven. They are probably the same ones who don't like laughter in church. Of course, the most immediate heaven that we know is a life lived right now in loving community with others, and I, at least, thank God that laughter is such a big part of the good life.

Whether the good, heavenly life includes humor is not a silly question. Especially as we are in the Easter season. A spirit of joyful exuberance only makes sense for Christians, as they celebrate Christ's victory over sin, death, and the powers of oppression. Many, many centuries ago, St. John Chrysostom preached a famous sermon in which he said that the resurrection of Jesus was a wonderful cosmic joke that God played on Satan. The devil had thought the Savior was dead and gone forever, and that his death on Calvary marked Hell's triumph. But, filled with mirth and delight, God had raised Jesus to new life. Thus, since that sermon by John Chrysostom, Easter Monday has been kept as a day of joy and laughter in the Greek and Slavic Christian traditions. People play pranks and tell jokes and have a hilarious time. It is called "Bright Monday." Well, modern Americans would never take time out on a workday for such fun, so I have for many years taken the Sunday after Easter as "Bright Sunday." In my sermon I do a sort of stand-up comedy routine, all in the spirit of John Chrysostom and heavenly laughter. So here are some Bright Sunday jokes which I hope will brighten your day.

Let me start with a question. Who was the first American politician? It was Christopher Columbus. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know where he was when he got there. And it was all paid for by the government, with other people's money.

Three men died and went to heaven. When they met St. Peter, he informed them that they would be given cars according to their virtue, and the index of virtue would be how faithful they had been to their spouse. St. Peter checked out his book on the first man and assigned him a Rolls-Royce. He drove away. The next man was found to be a bit wayward, so he was given a Chevrolet. The third man was given a

motorcycle, and he agreed that, after all the affairs he had had, that was about right. He rode off on his motorcycle, and before long passed the man in the Rolls-Royce, parked along the side of the road and weeping. "Why are you so sad?" asked the man on the motorcycle, "After all, you got a terrific car." "Yes, said the first man, 'but I just saw my dear departed wife go by on a skateboard!"

A Church of England priest had traveled from Birmingham to London to attend to the details of a new banner that was being made for his church. On his arrival, he found that he had lost the piece of paper listing the details. He sent his wife a telegram, asking her to send details by a return telegram. When the reply arrived, the clerk in the telegram office almost fainted. It read: "Unto us a child is born. Eight feet long. Three feet wide. Assorted colors."

A bishop once was visiting a parish and heard the rector preach. After the service, the bishop said to him, "Father, your message was very short." The priest said, "Better to be short than be boring." The bishop replied, "Yes, but Father, you managed to be both."

Three building contractors died and arrived at the Pearly Gates at the same time. St. Peter said to them, "Good you are here. The Gates need some repairs. Why don't you all give bids." The first contractor was from Santa Cruz, and he said, "I will do the work for you for \$900. That is \$300 for materials, \$300 for labor, and \$300 for me. The second contractor was from Los Gatos. He said, "Well, for me to do this job, it will cost \$1800. That's \$600 for materials, \$600 for labor, and \$600 for me." The third contractor was from Washington, D.C. He said, "St. Peter, I am going to give you a bid you are going to love. You are going to want my bid. I will do the job for \$2,900. That is \$1000 for you, \$1000 for me, and \$900 to the guy from Santa Cruz to fix the Gates."

A man once received this telegram from his ex-fiancee: "Dear John, words cannot express the deep remorse I feel at having broken our engagement. Will you please come back to me. Your absence from me leaves an emptiness which no one else could ever fill. Please forgive me, and let us start again. I love you. I love you. I love you. (Signed) Your adoring Sally. P.S. Congratulations on winning the New York Lottery."

Here's another joke about the lottery. A woman called her husband at work and said, "Honey, get home and pack your bags! I just won the lottery! "Great," he said, "Where are we going?" She answered, "Anywhere you want. You're the one who's leaving!"

A doctor once said to a woman, "I don't like the way your husband looks." She said, "I don't much either, but he's always been a good father to the children."

One last joke, this one a true story. I read it in a book by Robert Runcie, a previous Archbishop of Canterbury. He said that once he had to take a train from one city to another in England, and, when he got on the passenger car, he found that all the other passengers in the car were inmates of a mental institution, being taken on an excursion. The mental hospital attendant was counting the patients to be sure they were all there. He counted, "One, two, three, four, five." When he came to Runcie, he didn't

recognize him and said, "Who are you?" Runcie replied, "I am the Archbishop of Canterbury." The attendant smiled and, pointing at him, continued counting, "Six, seven, eight . . ."

Let me end with a little story from the wonderful Jesuit storyteller, Anthony de Mello. It is not a joke, but a great insight and good to close a Bright Sunday sermon with. The story goes this way: There was a Master Teacher who had a number of disciples. One day they asked him to tell them about the stages he had passed through on his quest for holiness. The Master said, "God first led me by the hand into the Land of Action, and I dwelled there for several years. Then God returned and led me to the Land of Sorrows. There I lived until my heart was purged of all false attachments. That's when I found myself in the Land of Love, whose burning flames consumed whatever was left in me of self-obsession. This brought me to the Land of Silence, where the mysteries of life and death were bared before my wondering eyes." "Was that the final stage of your journey?" the disciples asked. "No," the Master said. One day God said to me, 'Today I shall take you into the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, into the very heart of God.' And I was taken to the Land of Laughter."

Amen.

Keep My Commandments

Date: May 29, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

New Testament Lesson: Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we too are his offspring.'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

[Psalm 66:7-18, Page 674, BCP](#)

[New Testament Lesson: 1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

[Gospel: John 14:15-21](#)

Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Sermon

God has given us a mission: to live eternal life right now, and to share that possibility with others. We Episcopalians often give the first half a pretty good try. We want to live eternal life. We know it begins now; we know it is a new kind of living. We try to forgive as we've been forgiven. We try to be generous, just and merciful; and we struggle to understand what these mean in the midst of our lives. We struggle with our minds. We struggle with our consciences. And frequently we find that we need the guidance of the living God; but then, this is exactly what eternal living is about.

On the second part, though, to share the possibility of eternal living with others, we are not so good. Here, instead of asking for God's help, we are likely just to duck the whole matter. For this reason I think we have a golden opportunity in the lessons today, because they have a lot to say to us, and because we can watch a master at work.

Paul really knows what he's doing. There are three things in today's lessons that are keys to his greatness. 1) He listens with an open heart, finds out what people are thinking about, what's troubling them. 2) He engages them. He talks to them. He starts the conversation. 3) He knows it isn't up to him. He knows the Spirit of God is at work and that God is responsible for the results. Those three things make him great. Let's look at them one at a time.

So begin with this: Paul walked around Athens, observing. He found a very religious city. There were idols everywhere, public shrines where people left small offerings. Statues and shrines and temples to many god's – and in addition to all this the Acropolis, the most marvelous of its kind in the ancient world with temples to many gods. Yet in all this searching, Paul does not find a God with the greatness of the Jewish Creator or the mercy of Jesus Christ. So, curious and eager, he goes to a place famous for debate, the Areopagus, Mars Hill, where there is an inscription that says, "to an unknown God".

And here, where people come to discuss things, Paul sets out to begin a discussion. He has seen their inscription, "to an unknown God." He knows of a God who is Creator of all, not one among many, not the supreme, but the only. The many gods of the Greeks and Romans are vain and capricious, so Paul tells of a God who is not needy, not in any way, and yet cares for human beings. He says that even when we are unaware, this God is close to us, so close in fact that it is "in him we live and move and have our being."

These are astounding claims in ancient Athens, and yet Paul is not done. He goes on to say, "we are his offspring." That is, we are made in God's image. We are made for relationship with God. God made us to love us and teach us to love. Thus, Paul is inviting the Athenians to know God.

We know that some scoffed. We know that some continued the conversation with Paul. We know that some came to believe. Some of the marvel about Paul is that he listened so carefully, and then engaged people on subjects that interested them, engaged them on their own terms. But there's another thing about him that's even more marvelous. He didn't work alone. He trusted the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, *“If you love me you will keep my commandments.”* Does that mean the ten commandments? They are a fine beginning, a first learning for children, but no, that is not what Jesus means. His commandments are: *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* and *“Receive the Holy Spirit”* and *“Go into all the world, making disciples of every nationality. . .”* He is asking us to be stewards of his gospel. He is commanding us to share his love: eternal living. How can you live eternally this week, right there in the middle of the life you already have? Where, in the midst of that life, can you let God be God? What would God like you to do? From whom could you receive Christ’s light? On whom do you let it shine? It only travels from their hands to your hands, and from yours to theirs. If we’re willing to receive from others, God’s love can move, if we aren’t, it can’t. If we are willing to share what eternal living is all about, God can work with that. If we aren’t, too bad.

Jesus said, *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Strengthener, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”*

Paul knew that he was not alone. He cared about the Athenians because God did. He cared about the Corinthians because God did. He respected them and listened to them because God did. He engaged them in conversation because he was a steward of the gospel. He engaged them in conversation, so that they could know the love of the Creator, the forgiveness of Christ, and the abiding strength of the Holy Spirit. But he was able to do it because he was not alone.

It wasn’t up to him to convince people, to change their hearts, to bring about conversion. That would be playing God. Paul knew all about playing God. He’d had enough of that. When he had first recognized Jesus he had fallen off his horse blinded by the light and had to spend several years rethinking everything he knew. He didn’t want to get on that high horse again. It was his business to help people understand. It was the Holy Spirit’s job to change their hearts. That is a healthy partnership. That is stewardship of the gospel.

Sending Screwtape Packing

Date: June 5, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Stu Schlegel

Sermon

Our gospel reading this morning is a part of what is called our Lord's "High Priestly Prayer." In it he prays that we his followers may all be one as he and the father are one. The prayer is often understood as applying to our need for the ecumenical reunion of divided Christendom. But I think it also refers to all the squabbles and bickering within our various Churches as well. We have found ourselves in recent years in the Episcopal Church scrapping over a number of issues, which rather deeply have divided people within our Church. Do you remember the issue of inclusive language? Many women had complained for years that old usages in bible and liturgy, where "man" is used to mean "men and women" and where "he" is used to mean "he and she," made them feel discounted and left out. But many others could not see any force to this complaint. They were used to and fond of long-standing usages, and resented being asked to change. Another source of conflict among Episcopalians was about how the Eucharist was put on. At St Luke's in Los Gatos, where I was rector in the '80s and early '90s, some people found Rite I outmoded and the celebrant's facing away from the people unsocial and even offensive. Others, though, were prepared to stay away from services which didn't use Rite I or in which the priest stood behind the altar. Another big issue was the ordination of women to the priesthood and the office of bishop. In recent months, a sizable number of bishops and priests in England have decided to rejoin the Roman Catholic Church because the Synod of the Church of England moved to allow women to become bishops. And, of course, we all know how vexing the issue of sexuality has been. The question of whether gays and lesbians are the way they are because God made them that way or whether they are sinners has deeply divided many parishes and many dioceses. What is to be said about these issues?

Do you know C.S. Lewis's delightful and classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*? In it, Lewis imagines that evil is personified into Satan and his army of demons. Lewis gives us a devil, named Uncle Screwtape, who is a clever and ingenious old imp and who is in correspondence with his nephew a younger devil. Screwtape advises on strategies to subvert the gospel and their archenemy, the Church. In one wonderful section, old Screwtape is pondering how best he could hurt the Church, and it comes to him that there are some superb issues to take the Christians' minds off the gospel. If we update the book a bit, those wonderful issues could easily be precisely the ones I have mentioned: inclusive language, sexuality, women's ordination, and liturgy. What would be better than some good dilvisive issues to take our mind off the most important issues? You can almost hear Screwtape chuckle to himself, "Let's get the Christians fighting over matters such as these, and the love of God and of each other will go right out the window!"

This is, of course, exactly what the gospels say Satan tried to do with Jesus. Satan had our Lord in the desert for forty days of temptation, and what he did was to offer him some good things – political, economic and personal power – in hopes that they would make Jesus forget about the best thing, the really only important thing, which is faithfulness to God’s way, God’s love. Jesus responded, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” And that is the challenge to us. How do we do the same thing to old Screwtape? How do we put his subtle temptations behind us in those matters that lead us into unchristian quarreling?

Not, I think, by ignoring these issues, any more than Jesus ignored power. But by cutting through them with Christ and Christ’s gospel. By reframing the matters so that they can be seen as gospel issues and not just human issues. Not “Why should I be forced to say or listen to language that I am not used to? What a nuisance!” But, “Whom do these words help? Whom do they hurt? What end do they serve? Where is love in all this?” That is to get the issue right, and to send Screwtape packing! Not, “What is sin between two men or two women?” But, “What is love between two human beings?” This is to get the issue right and to send Screwtape away in tears. Not, “Whom has the Church always ordained? But, “What is the right thing to do? What does God want?” Not, “How am I used to us doing the service?” But, “How can we make our worship most meaningful, most moving, and most worthy of the Lord we serve and honor?” Can you see that, “What does God want? What is the loving thing? What advances the Kingdom?” and not “What do I find familiar and comfortable?” is to frame the issue correctly? And it is to leave a lot less room for old Screwtape to fool around.

Let me tell you a little story out of the Muslim Sufi tradition. There once was a greatly respected and loved teacher named Hufis. He was a Sufi sheik who could do all sorts of wonderful things. But he began to hear of another sheik, Raaleh, who travelers from the other side of Persia said could do even more wonderful things. Troubled, he set out to find her, and they met on the shore of the Persian Gulf. As it happened, it was prayer time. So Hufis took his prayer rug and flung it out on the water. Then, walking across the water, he said his prayers kneeling on his prayer rug, floating on the water. When finished, he turned to Raaleh. “Can you do that?” She took out her prayer rug and threw it into the air. Then, climbing an invisible staircase, she knelt down and said her prayers, floating in the air. Upon descending, she called to Hufis: “What you and I have done today, the fishes and birds do every day. Wouldn’t it be better if we put our energy into loving each other more and treating each other as valued human beings?”

There are so many matters about which we, as Christians and as Episcopalians, feel deeply. And this is as it should be. Jesus prayed that we might all be one. And it is our way as Anglicans to find our oneness in our concerns and not necessarily in our conclusions. But it is not easy, and it is so important that we take great care in how we set the issues. We are not called to seek out our own will and wishes in all things, but that which furthers love, peace, and joy for all. And this is just as true in all the rest of our lives and our affairs. Screwtape doesn’t just try to get us into ourselves and out of Christian charity only in churchy matters. He is out to get us in everything we do.

Amen.

You've Been Delivered; Don't Go Back!

Date: June 26, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; 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 22:1-14

God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

Psalm 13 Page 597, BCP

- 1 How long, O LORD? will you forget me for ever? *
how long will you hide your face from me?
- 2 How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,
and grief in my heart, day after day? *
how long shall my enemy triumph over me?
- 3 Look upon me and answer me, O LORD my God; *
give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death;
- 4 Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," *
and my foes rejoice that I have fallen.
- 5 But I put my trust in your mercy; *
my heart is joyful because of your saving help.
- 6 I will sing to the LORD, for he has dealt with me richly; *
I will praise the Name of the Lord Most High.

New Testament Lesson: Romans 6:12-23

Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer resent your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now

that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel: Matthew 11: 2-11

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Sermon

All the horror of that first reading, the almost sacrifice of Isaac, was a familiar horror to the ancients of most nations. Before the Jews were a nation, when they were just Abraham and his kin, they thought it necessary, as did the nations around them, to practice human sacrifice. This is the story of their departure from that relationship to God.

What if Abraham had been glad that the reprieve had been given, and the ram provided, but next time there was a crisis, he'd sacrificed Isaac? The other nations did these things to get the blessing of their gods on, for example, the gates of their cities. When I was growing up I heard stories of the men who had died pouring the concrete piers that hold the golden gate bridge, and I was awestruck. What if you fell in while they were pouring it, I asked my father, and he said, sadly, "Men did fall in." And I asked again, and he said, "There is nothing anybody can do." And I thought, workers gave their lives in accidents to build these amazing structures that are so important to our lives. But the ancients threw a first-born child in to appease the vanity and appropriate the strength of their gods. Until Abraham.

You've been set free. Don't go back. The voice of God said to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy. . ." And he remembered that, and that God, his God did not want human sacrifice, and provided something else, and he learned that God wants to be trusted, but has our good at heart and not cruelty or harm. The ancients would have thought this a very weak God that Abraham was worshipping. But Abraham and his people had been, in this one way, and I won't say, small way, set free!

The entire history of Revelation works like this. One glimpse at a time we are shown a new insight into who our God is, because God wants us to understand that we are created by love and for love and justice. Abraham learned that human sacrifice was not a way of showing utter devotion. Moses learned that Pharaoh was not the greatest power on earth and that God heard the cries of the people. At Sinai the people learned that God required they treat one another rightly as a part of their very relationship to God. It goes on, unfolding a little at a time, as we are ready.

Today is our feast day, the Nativity of John the Baptist, who was a prophet. That means he was one of those people who contradicted the common wisdom, spoke out about the injustice and ungodliness of his day, and angered those who thought the oppressed were oppressed because they deserved to be oppressed - particularly King Herod, who had a cushy seat as long as he gave the Romans a kind of legitimacy and didn't say much about the way they brutalized his people.

John said there was a time coming, a new reign, not like Herod's, not like the Romans, the reign of a God, not a king, who loved them and would bring justice where there was hatred now, all because God's word is powerful and God was on the move. When Jesus began his ministry John introduced him as the inauguration of that new time.

The song we sang for John this morning says, "O Zion that tellest good tidings, get thee up to the heights and sing, proclaim to a desolate people the coming of their king!" I wonder if we, named for him, see ourselves as proclaiming "to a desolate people the coming of their king." Do we see what disheartens people in our own day, the fracturing of society with extreme language, flagrant disregard for the unity of our people, siloing of interests until we have little sense of what it means to contribute to the common good. Do we see that the gap between rich and poor is accelerating, here and around the world, and do we respond with concern and action? Do we see that people need faith in God to give them the courage to lead wholesome lives, and do we show what that faith means to us? John did.

That is what it means to "build a house where all can dwell, where all can safely live/ a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive/ built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace (we're talking about a community, right?, the kind of community that a place of worship stands for) / Here the love of Christ shall end divisions/ All are welcome in this place. These are words in the tradition of John - to stand with the word of God is to invest yourself in the common good and build a community that is very different from the world in which it lives, and from there to speak to that world, and better it. By this, too, God is revealed.

Because of this, as we celebrate our 122nd anniversary – since people of faith, in 1889, began a service and a Sunday school in homes on Depot Hill in Capitola, as an outreach of Calvary Church in Santa Cruz. We celebrate it owing a debt to their vision and the way they provided for us, building that first campus as we are building now for the next century. We celebrate it owing our greatest debt to the revelation God has been giving over so many centuries, through Abraham, through Moses, and through our Savior Jesus Christ.

Paul explains to us in Romans today that we used to be slaves to estrangement: without Christ who is God's forgiveness and invitation to life with God, we were at enmity, full of resentment, in competition with other people for our very standing, our worth as human beings, getting more distant from God and others all the time as we were wronged and as we lashed out in reaction. We were slaves to that, just as Abraham was once a slave to what he thought was a God of human sacrifice, just as Moses and his people were before they knew God intended to bring them out of slavery and into covenant. And now, Paul teaches us, being free, we don't want to return to that enmity, that anger, but

to receive God's grace in Jesus, experience God's grace that sought us out, embrace God's grace that has given us a new inner life, and live God's grace out in the way we are in the world, so that we live lives of freedom, so that we give our world a sign of the wholesome things that God can do.

Abraham could have gone back to child sacrifice. Moses could have gone back to thinking God doesn't hear the cries of his people. We could return to anger and estrangement and forget the love of Jesus.

The song says, "Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space." That was John the Baptist's kind of talk, and I hope it will always be ours.

Take My Yoke Upon You

Date: July 3, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Catherine Keyser-Mary

Sermon

Today is the first time I've gotten to preach here at St. John's since the Sunday services before you voted to call Fr. Steve to be your rector 15 years ago. I'd like to thank Bishop Mary, Fr. Steve and you-all for welcoming me back home.

St John's is my home. When my husband and I moved here from the Pasadena area in the 80's and bought our home on Capitola Rd. our lives wonderfully changed. And, as a girl my family would come over from Ripon/Modesto area to Buella Park Christian Campground for our summer vacations. Of course, we hit the beach and the board-walk. I have always loved the beach and the mountains, and now I'm back again. Yeah!

Since I'm returning as a retired Priest now after 20 years having served the Episcopal church in the Dioceses of Spokane and Los Angeles, I'm tempted to want to impress you with what a great preacher I am. You can relax, I've given that up! Instead I want to share with you what the gospel of Christ means to me from today's lesson in Matthew 12:29-30

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me....for my yoke is easy and my burden is light

(During the family service I will bring in my dog on a leash and talk with the kids.) Let me show you what I mean. I'll bring in Rufus and show you what the leash is. (This is like the yoke that Jesus uses, Explain, the function of the yoke in farming.)

All humans are connected to others. You and I are connected together, either through fear or love. That connection is what we see when we copy others or want to be like them. We are very much tied up with them, like a leash is tying Rufus and me together.

Many times the leash we use is invisible to us, but it's there anyway. What ties us together is either the yoke/leash of "Law" with its fear of punishment or the yoke/leash of "Love" with its hoped-for forgiveness. I'm guessing you and I have deeply felt times of both fear and hope in times of suffering. Fear or Hope are what can tie us up in knots or let us relax into joy. I remember my last 10 years with my 3 cancer surgeries and my husband's Alzheimer's. My son, David in Chicago just told me about he and his daughter doing rock climbing this week being connected by a rope. That like the yoke of Christ giving security and joy to us.

You have your own stories you could share with me here also. Tears and laughter are part of the work of Christ that I'm talking about. The yoke/leash of grace.

Some of us in the congregation are taking a course in Compassionate Conversation to help us learn how to better speak words with love rather than words with fear for our own families and co-workers.

In today's Gospel Jesus reminds his disciples then and us the disciples of today that we are invited to be connected to him through his yoke and thereby to be able to let go of the hurts and burdens of our lives and let him guide/lead/leash us to himself. Can you feel the change?

In a moment we will come to this table for the remembering of the Real Christ who ties/leashes us to himself in Mercy. The Holy Eucharist is the place and process of letting go of our being tied up in the knots of fear and where we can renew our resting, being healed and straightened into the ultimate connection of "His yoke is easy, his burden is light.

A song from my childhood says "His yoke is easy his burden is light I've found it so I found it so. His service is my greatest delight, His blessings ever flow."
Amen.

Birthright

Date: July 10, 2011

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: Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

[Psalm 119:105-112 Page 772, BCP](#)

- 105 Your word is a lantern to my feet * and a light upon my path.
- 106 I have sworn and am determined * to keep your righteous judgments.
- 107 I am deeply troubled; * preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.
- 108 Accept, O LORD, the willing tribute of my lips, *
and teach me your judgments.
- 109 My life is always in my hand, * yet I do not forget your law.
- 110 The wicked have set a trap for me, *
but I have not strayed from your commandments.
- 111 Your decrees are my inheritance for ever; * truly, they are the joy of my heart.
- 112 I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes * for ever and to the end.

New Testament Lesson: Romans 8:1-11

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Sermon

There is a terrible shame in the action of Esau, his contempt for all that his father cherishes, his contempt for his father's God. Isaac is the son of Abraham, the child of Abraham's old age, the proof of the promise and covenant with God that his descendants would be many and that by his name many nations would bless themselves. Isaac has experienced all his life his Father's singular devotion, and now he has grown sons to whom he passes on this birthright. To these sons he will pass the leadership of all that God intends for their line, and the spiritual memory and power that is growing in them, the story that will bless the world. Everything that has come down to us as the very foundation of our gospel heritage, all this Esau values as fair trade for a bowl of lentil stew. He doesn't want the responsibilities of the elder son. It isn't a divine blessing to him, it is a burden he doesn't want.

I can't read this story without a sense of terrible shame. All that God is trying to do with humankind to heal our brokenness, to restore our dignity, is valued at, "Sure, whatever. Give me some stew. I'm *hungry*." I can hardly stand to be witness to this, watching it happen makes my skin crawl. I want to coach him, to yell out, "Wait, Esau, don't you realize what is at stake?" - you know how we feel in a novel or a movie when someone is making a fateful mistake . . . I remember times when I was ungrateful with my own father. I think of times when I resisted because I thought God was asking too much. I think of what has served as that tempting bowl of stew in my life. And Genesis comments on this story with such simple astonishment, "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

As citizens of a democracy we have a great birthright of freedom, rule of law, vision of every person's worth and right to participate in forming our common life. As Episcopalians we have the whole power of Jesus, his teaching and his Cross, his Resurrection, of the Scriptures now developed so far beyond the understanding of Abraham and Isaac through God's continuing revelation. We have the living presence of God in the fellowship of the Church and its Sacraments. We have certain characteristics as Episcopalians, the fullness of the faith, a tolerant spirit, an appreciation of mystery that dates to our Celtic heritage, a commitment to diversity that goes back to Queen Elizabeth. These things are for us a birthright - a blessing to inherit, a place to stand, a responsibility to grow into, and a heritage to develop in our own time and to pass on.

So it is awful to watch Esau sell his birthright. Not that people don't squander their heritage all the time, just that here we are watching it happen. It isn't just that you inherit Christ or that I preach Christ and the Bible but that we love and cherish our birthright! My work is to be sure that we realize that we have this birthright, that I urge you to take responsibility for it, take pride in it, stand in awe of what God is doing.

It is mine to remind you that our hands at work are God's hands, our hearts at work are how God's heart is known here and now. Our understanding seeking God's understanding is how God's dreams influence our community, as we look at troubles and say, "How can we turn this situation to the Lord's advantage? How can this be a blessing to everyone-to the common good?" Ann Isaacs looked at homeless folks and for thirty-five years she fed and talked to the homeless. Gina Muller has a passion

for reconciliation, and it is becoming a series of courses for practical strategies for healing anger. But for things like this to happen the word must be taken to heart, it must be cherished.

Which is why the gospel lesson today is paired with the story of Esau. A sower went out to sow: The **soil of the path** does not bear fruit because the soil of the path is shallow and hard - it has no understanding - it does not ponder or cherish. In it seed cannot grow - even the word of God makes no impact and is quickly lost.

The **rocky soil** does not bear fruit because this is the person who sees blessing without responsibility. They haven't seen the implication, that God's love for them means their love for others. Glad to receive, but not to live in the blessing, they hope to be blessed without being transformed. But God's blessing does not merely flow into us, God's love moves through us, or it cannot move at all. "Love, to be love, must be given away."¹

And the gospel is not done with us. There are still more ways to squander the birthright. **Thorny soil** does not bear fruit because it is the heart that values God's love as one nice acquisition among many others. Worries about security and the desire for wealth keep this person occupied so that they do not do much with the love of God that is given them. This person may well understand how important forgiveness and love and community are. They may see the transforming power that God's grace has and even experience it at some time in their lives. And yet they end up putting their trust elsewhere, loving the idea of God, but not walking with God in a practical way, and what they might have done, might have experienced, slips through their fingers.

But the heart that cherishes the covenant with God as a birthright above all others, that heart receives the word and ponders it deeply. That heart allows God to work transformation inwardly. Through that heart the word of God moves to the hands, to the feet, to the mouth, to the eyes, to the understanding, to the motivation, to the will, to determination, to commitment, to conviction. That heart becomes strong. That life becomes consecrated. That soil bears fruit. God gets to rejoice over a harvest of changed lives, of deepened community, of trust and reconciliation, multiplied in the lives of others 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold. These things happen because of the transformation, because they walk with God, not by painstaking effort, but by that steady attention and trust we call faith.

Jacob picked up the slack, and saved God's initiative, the great heritage so that it came down to us. What if he had not? And what of Esau's children, his descendants? What might God have done through Esau? Thus we change the community, thus we show our families who we serve. What might God have in mind to do through you, through me? What might be lost if we leave our birthright for someone else to carry?

¹*The Sound of Music*, Rodgers and Hammerstein

Loving Arms and Beautiful Feet

Date: August 7, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; 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 37:1-4,12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" -- that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell

him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b Page 738, BCP

1 Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; *

make known his deeds among the peoples.

2 Sing to him, sing praises to him, *

and speak of all his marvelous works.

3 Glory in his holy Name; *

let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

4 Search for the LORD and his strength; *

continually seek his face.

5 Remember the marvels he has done, *

his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,

6 O offspring of Abraham his servant, *

O children of Jacob his chosen.

16 Then he called for a famine in the land *

and destroyed the supply of bread.

17 He sent a man before them, *

Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

18 They bruised his feet in fetters; *

his neck they put in an iron collar.

19 Until his prediction came to pass, *

the word of the LORD tested him.

20 The king sent and released him; *

the ruler of the peoples set him free.

21 He set him as a master over his household,*

as a ruler over all his possessions,

22 To instruct his princes according to his will*

and to teach his elders wisdom.

45b Hallelujah!

New Testament Lesson: Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

"The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart"

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the honor of your Name. [BCP p.101]

I've been on vacation for three weeks, living a quieter life. I went out to assess how much stain I needed to put on the deck behind our house and ended up tearing out most of the decking and replacing both beam and joists, decking soon to follow (when it goes on sale). And with that distance from the everyday concerns of our common life as St. John's, I've been thinking about our faith. Thursday I spent the morning with a seminary classmate, Bob Gaestel, who I meet about this time each year, to keep in touch. We've been serving congregations for 32 years, each of us. We talked about the world, about families and books, and especially about the way of life that is our faith.

Romans this morning does that. It says faith is not hard to acquire, not hidden knowledge, not inaccessible. It says anyone can have faith so long as they take it to heart – "believe" doesn't mean to think it, but *to live by it*. This is, Romans says, there for everyone, for anyone, so long as someone tells them about it.

To enter into faith is simply to enter into the life of the Church and let God do what God does. Renewal in the inner life. Forgiveness. Healing the heart. Daily prayer and godly vision. Learning that we are loved from the very roots of the universe. Learning worship and service: the transforming experience of Christian Community. Learning to reach out: sharing our hope in Christ and doing justice in Jesus' name.

What Bob and I talked about, with the ease of old friends, was that it comes down to this: our faith is a way of life. And what I experienced on vacation was this: I am deeply grateful for this way of life, this love of God in all we do.

Romans says this way of life is there for everyone, anyone. *The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.* But it isn't something that people know about unless someone tells them, shows them, invites them, intrigues them. Because this way of life is the life of the individual as a member of a community, a faith community. It has to be experienced to be understood, to be chosen. People know all kinds of things about it – many of them are false. The picture of our faith that is out there in popular culture is not attractive, by and large. It wasn't easy to share the faith in Paul's day either. That is why

Paul loved the vision of lots of faithful people walking to others to tell all the wonders of God's grace: *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!* That is really something to behold: people who care enough to share this wonderful truth, this way of life. Paul rejoices: *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!*

I'm wondering this morning, if you have beautiful feet? And to what degree I have beautiful feet. Not the physical feet – my size 14s – no, the feet that stand up for Jesus, go to the help of people in need, and speak to the hearts of those without hope. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news! This is New Testament use of the word evangelizing: the person who does not keep the goodness of God a secret from others. That's all it means.

When people begin the process of becoming members at St. John's we bless their heads and ears and eyes and mouths, their hands and hearts and – their feet! In the sharing of the good news, the astounding news that God wants to be at peace with every human being and to put the peace of Jesus in each human heart, in sharing this news, our feet and hands are of great importance. It is what we do that people can see. It is what we are willing to stand up for in deed and word that will speak to people, give them hope. People today need hope. How can they know unless we tell them?

I know how easy it is to duck these conversations. Someone is hurting. You could listen, but you don't know if you'd know what to say. Of course you could just listen, and quietly pray for them over time, and continue to be interested, and let that love speak. Or, if it seems right, you could invite them, directly or indirectly, to come to church with you. Or you could offer to pray with them, if you were feeling bold. Whatever God leads you to, in your heart, there is that reticence – which can be a very good thing, a mark of respect. We don't have the answers, individually, we just point to God. God works the transformations in us. But what if, in our respectfulness, we withhold the invitation they need, the hope we have? Might there be respectful ways to let on where we find our hope? If Jesus can extend his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, perhaps we can, by his Spirit, extend our hands and feet in love, so that others may know him? Some of you do this so forthrightly, God bless you. May we all be encouraged by your example!

So let's do something about it. Let's draw some feet, from the altar to the world outside. Symbolic feet. Beautiful feet. Your feet and my feet, on their way to share good news.

I am That I am – Holding the Vision

Date: August 28, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms: 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c Page 738, BCP

New Testament Lesson: Romans 12:9-21

Gospel: Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon

When Paul lays out the ethic, the way of life, that comes from his theology . . . it is a beautiful, steady, humble, wonderful thing. Our efforts would be a beautiful thing in any life if they were guided by this passage, not that we practice very well, but that the light of God shines through, but the fact is, we often live our lives in very difficult circumstances, and often there is an undertow working against our efforts even when we are doing the best we can.

Yet Paul calls for people to be strong and relentlessly constructive, always working for the good no matter what the opposition. It is summed up with great courage: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

When the hurricane is over there will be a great ceremony to give this nation a MLK Jr statue on the National Mall. He changed this country precisely by living this ethic that Paul sets out today. We have terribly mixed feelings about those who practice this way of life. Trouble with this ethic is, it isn't clear that it will get you ahead. It might get you killed. It isn't clear that it is the good life, because one wants to live the good life not only altruistically, but also so that life is good, to enjoy one's days. . . . so how can you do all Paul says when other people may not reciprocate, when your words may be twisted, your strong words resented, your gentleness is used against you? *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.* It is all very lovely and courageous, but if you practice this aren't you putting yourself at a disadvantage?

Peter is horrified when Jesus teaches about this nonviolent power to reveal God's ways. It looks to Peter like a recipe for failure. It can only work, Jesus says to Peter, if you are willing to die, to lay down your life, to suffer through some stuff for the sake of the goals, for the common good, for what is right, knowing God is at work. If you set your mind on divine things, not on your human notions of power, if you are willing to lose your life for Jesus sake, then and only then is a Christian likely to find the fullness of his or her humanity, the meaning of life and love.

This is the huge vision that Jesus had, that he clung to, that the saints cling to, that we celebrate every Sunday in Eucharist so that we can find the fullness of our humanity. God says, "I am that I am." We believe it, we bring our center there – and the conflicting demands of our lives begin to have a Copernican revolution. They begin to come into order, because we are now oriented on true center.

We have a class in contemplative living coming up. It is about learning to pray in God's presence and stay in God's presence.

It is hard when you are putting up with unjust stuff so that an organization can stay on track. Whether it is a family or a workplace doesn't matter. It is hard when people make out your motives to be different than they are, or lie about your actions to make themselves look good. And yet those who persevere, who consider the mission important and keep on telling the truth, and telling it without malice, and telling it constructively, who keep doing what is right while others misbehave, are serving the common good, and walking in Jesus' footsteps.

But Peter must be wondering, how are they able? Where do they get the courage to do what they do, to stay positive, to avoid hateful and destructive actions even when such are directed at them? **It takes a larger vision.** You can't be willing to take up your cross, you can't be willing to lay down your life, you can't be willing to return constructive action and truthful speech when you are mistreated, without somewhere to stand.

Peter tells Jesus to avoid suffering. Jesus says that is the viewpoint of one who doesn't trust God, that Peter needs a divine perspective. Don't we all! Whatever injustice you face – God's love can save you from becoming hateful, save your cause from becoming vengeful, strengthen you to return good for evil.

Learning to see it all in the larger context of God's vision, and learning to live in God's presence, that is the invitation and the gift. God's way of saving us from being caught up in a world of resentment and lies. Learn to bless those who persecute you, and to pray for them, without tolerating their lies, and you have found your maturity, your humanity, your faith, God's presence.

Proper 21 Year A

Date: September 25, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

[Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalm: 78](#)

[New Testament Lesson: Philippians 2:1-13](#)

[Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32](#)

Sermon

Which son did the will of his father? For Jesus, actions speak louder than words, and even the chief priests and the elders have to admit that the son who denied his father but had a change of heart was the obedient one. Matthew has paired this mini-parable with a dialog on authority in which we see that the concern of the priests and elders is not so much with the will of God as it is about politics. When they query Jesus on where he gets the authority to do the things he does, he puts the ball back in their court with a question about John the Baptist – our guy! You know, the funny-looking individual dressed in camel’s hair, eating locusts and baptizing people out in the river. He asks where John’s authority comes from and puts them on the spot. If they say John’s actions are based on God’s authority, they risk overturning their own. They are part of a theocracy in which their own positions of power and status are based on a direct line of authority from God to them to the people. If John’s works come from God, it cuts them out completely and they lose control of both situation and populace. If, on the other hand, they were to say, “John? That hippie? What authority?” they are apt to lose control in another way, because John the baptizer is a pretty popular guy among the people. Tax collectors and prostitutes are coming to him and their lives are being transformed in stark contrast to the priests and elders themselves, for whom transformation is not a desirable commodity.

Actions speak louder than words. In Exodus last week we heard how God miraculously saved the Hebrew people from the advancing army of Pharaoh by letting them cross over the Red Sea on dry land. Amazing! And yet, here they are, terrified that they will die of thirst in the wilderness, unwilling to trust in God’s providence even after so stunning a demonstration. And now, Moses strikes the rock and water pours forth to slake their thirst. What will it take for this people to be transformed? Will water from the rock do the trick? The baptismal rock fountain in our own courtyard is modeled on this story and demonstration of the never-ending grace and abundance of God. Is our baptism enough to transform us, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, into people whose trust is really in God, people for whom Jesus has real authority in our lives? On the other hand, the self-revelation of God through actions is

consistent: salvation from disaster, sustenance – water, manna and quail – in the wilderness; and lives transformed.

In Jesus' own life, actions speak louder than words. Philippians tells us that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." "Grasped" comes from the King James. The New RSV says "exploited". Either way, grasping and exploiting take a lot of energy. Can you imagine how it might have been if Jesus thought that appearances mattered, that he needed to look like God? He would have been like the elders and priests. True authority comes through authenticity. Jesus pours himself out, like water from the rock. He empties himself, lets go, opens himself to the will of his father. Rather than holding on for dear life, it's actually easier for us to let go, to open our hands to do what God is calling us to do. In fact, if I had to name one verse in the Bible that epitomizes stewardship, this would probably be it. Only if we empty ourselves are we available to be God's hands and feet in the world. Only if we let go of our preconceptions about what's appropriate when we hear God's call – only then – are we available to do what God is calling us to do.

You know how it is when we have an image of ourselves that conforms to expectations – our own, or somebody else's. Then we do the things we think we're supposed to do. But that's like wearing earplugs when it comes to doing what God is calling us to do. The tax collectors and the prostitutes who went out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River may have had pretty fixed ideas about who they were and what they were capable of, and those ideas were probably pretty limiting. But they were looking for something better, and they didn't have much to lose. So when God called them in the person of John, they could hear! Contrast the elders and the priests, for whom life was a series of appearances to be maintained in the service of a power structure that kept them secure. They had a lot to lose, and they were deaf and blind. Jesus points out that their hearts were not turned, even after they saw the lives of those less fortunate changed for the better. You would think that would make them see the light, but their positions of authority in a corrupt structure involved the complicity of those whose lives were being chewed up by a system of exploitation.

Think, then, of the tax collectors and prostitutes whose lives were turned upside down by their encounter with John and so, by their encounter with Jesus. Think how joyful they must have been to be set free of this broken system, their broken lives. They are free to become servants of another kind, free to love and serve God. Just as Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, now these people are free to take on the image of God, loving and giving as God loves and gives. Servants...and stewards. Just like us. God gives everything – his son and his life to us, for our lives. God stands ever ready to forgive when we lose faith, when we complain of being thirsty, when we refuse to trust. And in return for this, God in Christ asks for all that we are and all that we have in order to spread this joy and freedom around. This is why we're here. This is why we pledge.

Look around you here. Look at the faces of the people in our congregation. Look at the building, at what we have, with God's help, pulled off to be a fitting place for ministry. Look at all God has entrusted to our care. Think of the kids in our parish family, each one entrusted to us. We've promised to do all in our power to support them in their life in Christ. And our strategic planning committee has asked us and we've said that ministry to children and their families is important to us, is something God is calling us to do. So when you hear an appeal to help with ministry to kids, think about that. Think about joining the

faithful few who do these ministries, week in, week out. Think of the fabulous things we could do if a few more grandparents and potential friends of kids signed up. In a few weeks, Valerie and I will be doing a forum to tell you about some of these great ideas. Or maybe some other ministry is calling to you. Caring ministries, with those who are sick or in trouble. Or lectors, or ushers, or Outreach: something that will involve you more deeply in the life of God. Also, from time to time each of us is the recipient of some of these ministries. And that's a kind of ministry of its own, because it involves us more deeply with one another.

Back to the two sons and the vineyard. The first son saw himself, maybe like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, as someone who just wouldn't go. When God called, he was busy elsewhere. Reminds me of that line from a Sidney Carter song, "we are Christians – always willing; never able". BUT. God wouldn't let that son go. God kept on calling. And there was something in the son's heart – latent love of his father? Gratitude? Guilt and a wish to be free of it? That caused him to turn around and get out there in the field. Once our ears are open, for whatever reason, God will not let us alone. God will keep bugging us until we get the message, until we claim the image of God as our own, until we become the loving and giving stewards God calls us to be, emptying ourselves, and all we are, and all we have, for the life of the kingdom.

Proper 23 Year A

Date: October 09, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm: 106:1-6,19-23

New Testament Lesson: Philippians 4:4-13

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Sermon

God is having a **wonderful** party. And you're invited! You know the feeling you have when you look at the mail, and there's one envelope that looks important. It's addressed by hand, and the paper is colored, a little heavier than usual, and you **know** it's not a bill. And you open it up, and – isn't that nice? – it's an invitation to a party. And not just any party. You can tell that this is going to be a very special party, with great food and drink, and really interesting people. You know that the host or hostess will really have worked hard preparing this wonderful food, and cleaning up the house, and you are pleased – not just at the prospect of attending the party, but that they thought to invite **you**. How nice to be included!

So you start thinking. You look at your calendar and see that you can make it, then you start to plan. Maybe I'll get a new outfit. Perhaps a haircut? In any case, you want to appear equal to the occasion. Matthew, in these two parables of the Great Supper and the Guest Without a Wedding Garment, is trying to tell us that the Kingdom of Heaven is just like that. God is having a party, and everyone here has received a hand-lettered invitation. You wouldn't **dream** of refusing. Would you?

In the parable, all the invited guests have something better to do. But that's not all. A group of the invited guests seize the host's slaves, first mistreat them, then **kill** them. That's pretty strange. Why would anyone do that? Then the host – a king – sends his slaves back to kill the murderers and to burn down their city. Some party! Meanwhile, isn't the food getting cold? By the time the king sends his slaves out to invite people off the street, you **bet** they came. Eat cold, old food or be burnt up! Somehow, this doesn't have the ring of one of the parables of Jesus. This doesn't sound like the Kingdom of God, where every tear will be wiped away. This sounds like forced feeding.

And, indeed, a little sleuthing gives us a different picture. The same parable appears in Luke, and it seems that Matthew has made some changes. In Luke, the host is not a king, and the feast is not a wedding. The invited guests can't make it, and are replaced by others, but nobody gets killed. If you remember the parable of the wicked tenants from last week, you may remember that, for Matthew, a parable is not enough. Parables, with all their ambiguity and mystery and hidden potential, are not

Matthew's kind of story at all. So he's made Jesus' parable into an allegory, where everything stands for something that the well-informed first century follower of Matthew's community would recognize. The host/king is God, the bridegroom is Jesus, the wedding feast is the heavenly banquet prepared for the faithful, the invited guests who didn't show were the Jewish community who rejected Jesus. The rag, tag and bobtail who were invited off the street were the Gentile community of Christians. And the killing of the invited guests and the burning of their city probably represents the destruction of Jerusalem in the Jewish Wars in the year 70. God? Or Caesar?

But that's not enough to tell the whole story. Because the real conclusion is still, as in Luke, that the conduct of those new guests invited off the street really doesn't matter. No matter who they are, no matter how they behave, no matter what their pasts are like, they are still the guests of honor at this most wonderful of all banquets. The way the story ends in Luke suggests that Jesus may not have had a problem with that. But Matthew does! So he adds another parable onto the end as part of the same story. The guest without an outfit. Now how could someone who came in off the street be expected to have gone down to the bazaar, or the mall to get a new suit of clothes for the occasion?

Again, Matthew has changed the story. Originally, this was a guest invited from the beginning. In the ancient Near East, when you were going to give a party, you first sent word to everyone that they were invited. Then, on the actual day, you sent someone around to summon the guests. This particular guest had always intended to come, but when the summons came, he was just too late. Like the story of the maidens who forgot to get oil for their lamps, when he showed up for the party, the door was shut in his face.

There's a story about a first century Palestinian rabbi named Eliezer. And the rabbi Eliezer was very old and wise and respected, and as he lay on his deathbed, all his disciples gathered around him. And there were so many of them that they filled the room and spilled out into the hallway. And as he lay struggling for breath, he indicated that he had something to say. He motioned to his first follower to come close. And his first follower, the one standing next to the bed, helped the rabbi to raise his head up on the pillows, and he said, in a whisper, "Repent one day before your death."

And his words of wisdom went back all the way through the crowd of followers, from one person to the next: "The rabbi says, 'repent one day before your death.'" Finally, it got to the man standing all the way at the end of the line, down the hall, just outside the kitchen. "The rabbi says, 'repent one day before your death'". And he scratched his beard, and thought for a minute, and said to the man next to him,

"Ask the rabbi, how do you know when that is?" And so it went, all the way back to the head of the line: "How do you know when that is?" And the first disciple leaned down to ask the rabbi. But just at that moment, of course, the rabbi died.

You never know, of course, when that day is going to come. So the story of the wedding guest, and of the rabbi, is that we'd better get ready right now. But you will notice that Jesus did not couch this story in terms of beating yourself up, and duty, and obligation. No. It's about going out and putting on your glad rags for the party. It's about joy, and coming home like the prodigal son and being welcomed into the banquet hall. And I think this has a bearing on our lives as Christians. Baptism is our hand-lettered

invitation to the party. And it doesn't matter who you are or what your past life is like. The appropriate response is **not**, "Oh, I've been bad, gotta stop having fun now. Gotta do the things I don't want to do."

The appropriate response is, "Wonderful, Lord! I've got an invitation! I'm gonna put on my new dress! I'm gonna help make the hors d'oeuvres! I'm gonna party with God!" And I'll tell you something else. This is not a party that starts after you're dead. It may continue far into the night. This is a party that can last forever. But it begins – right now. Right now. This is about **joy**. When we look at our lives as Christians, it's an opportunity to experience those feelings of being a favored guest, of being included in the party, for ourselves and for those whose lives we touch. Think of your own ministry, or of our community of St. John's as being based this vision of the banquet: a vision of infinite possibility, of God's grace as being more than enough to include everyone. Isn't that really what the mission of the Church is all about? Stewardship of time, talent, treasure: of our whole selves, our souls and bodies...that's how you get ready for the party.

Next week, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, is making a pastoral visit to Zimbabwe, where, because of Mugabe's repressive regime, Anglicans have been harassed by the government, and turned out of their churches. Priests have been beaten by the police and run out of their homes. The diocesan offices in Harare have been taken over by an impostor bishop, a friend of Mugabe's, and the rightful bishops and clergy have to hold church in open fields. So the Archbishop will preach, not in the cathedral in Harare, but at a Eucharist at the National Sports Stadium. And you can bet every seat in that stadium will be filled. He will meet with local Anglicans and their bishops who continue to serve the community despite an environment of disruption, intimidation and violence in recent times. Now that's a sign of the Kingdom. That's a celebration of the banquet! if they can do it, what about us, who worship unmolested, who enjoy so many blessings? Can we accept the invitation? Can we embody a spirit of joyfulness no matter what?

Here at St. John's every Sunday we have an opportunity to recreate – to re-member the heavenly banquet. In the Eucharist, we see the commemoration of God's saving purpose in history. We have a chance to feel the joy of finally being included that the sinners and tax collectors must have felt as Jesus himself sat down to eat with them. When we receive the bread and wine, **we** are the spiritual heirs of those disciples who met with Jesus one more time at the Last Supper, not only in sorrow, but with incredible thankfulness to have been among the chosen.

In the words of the Book of Common prayer as it appeared in the 17th century,

"It is my duty to exhort you to consider the dignity of that holy Mystery,...and so search and examine your own consciences...that you may come holy & clean to such a heavenly feast, in the marriage garment required by God in Holy Scripture, and be received as worthy partakers of that Holy Table."

Do I see the glint of satin out there? Do I hear the rustle of spiritual silk? Put on your glad rags, and come to the banquet!

Proper 25 Year A

Date: October 23, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm: 90:1-6, 13-17

New Testament Lesson: I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

Sermon

Jesus knew the Law. Rabbinical scholars knew that there were 613 commandments, and those that form our Great Commandment and its corollary are only two of them. So it was a favorite pastime of those religious scholars to debate the Law – which commandments were more important than others? And why? That’s what’s happening in the gospel passage from Matthew. The Pharisees are playing Stump the Rabbi. Jesus knew the Great Commandment from Deuteronomy [6:5] as the *Shemah*: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your might.” And the injunction to love your neighbor comes from Leviticus [19:18]: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. All those Pharisees listening to him would surely agree about the primacy of loving God with all you’ve got. But the injunction to love your neighbor was not nearly as central to the understanding of the Law. His hearers, in fact, might have taken issue with his listing of this commandment as being so important. Those scholars would have said that the world hangs on Torah (what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scripture), on Temple service, and deeds of loving-kindness; on truth, judgment and peace [m. ‘Abot 1:2, 18]. So, in their understanding, love comes from the Law. Jesus, as he so often does, turns this upside down. In putting together love of God and love of neighbor, he makes it clear that it’s the Law that comes from Love. And this, for us, is the core of the new that comes in Christ. The Law itself is dependent on deeds of love. When Jesus says, “on these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets”, he is also saying that all the other 611 commandments in Torah, in the Law, are contained, are subsumed, within these two commandments of love: God and neighbor.

This discourse is followed by some editorial comment by Matthew, who, for the sake of his own community, puts into Jesus’ mouth a seemingly unrelated question about the nature of the Messiah, asking the Pharisees a riddle that, for us, points to Jesus himself, but which effectively stopped the conversation.

To me, though, if you're looking for a conversation-stopper, the first two commandments are more than enough. Consider the word, "all". Such a little word. But. It is not part, not a little bit, not what you think might be right, but all. We are to love God with ALL our heart, with ALL our soul, with ALL our mind. This is the precondition for loving our neighbor as ourselves. Is it even possible to do this? These are tough questions. We say these commandments every Sunday at 8:00, at the Rite I service. But sometimes, in the majestic language of that service, it's just a lovely noise, or a reminder of the faith of the ages more than the job that lies ahead of each one of us today.

What would it mean if we really took it seriously? How can we manifest that little word "all" into our real lives? Let's face it – it's a test most of us would fail miserably. I don't say that to beat us all up; we're human. Jesus sets a bar higher than most of us will ever attain. "All" means, "with everything that we are" – heart, soul and mind.

To love with all your heart. Love is what hearts are for. Jesus also said, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also". How can you tell what you treasure? What occupies you before you go to sleep, when you daydream, when you worry, or feel joy or satisfaction? What's your first priority, the center of your energy and attention. Is it love of God and strangers? Where do our hearts turn most of the time?

How about the soul? What is it, anyway, as different from the heart? Is it the deepest part of ourselves, the core, the eternal essence? It can't be defined, or held in your hand. What's in that core? This is the part of ourselves that holds our most profound and valued and sacred essence. Is it, in fact, God within us? And if so, how can we listen to that voice that is calling us, if only we could hear, to love God fully, completely, and without reservation?

And our minds. That rational part of us. (Or should I say, the part that rationalizes). It is the key to understanding and reason. It's how we determine our values, the scale on which we weigh life. St. Paul talked about "putting on the mind of Christ", that is, seeing the world around us, not through the eyes of our contemporary culture, but through the eyes of Jesus. Our own minds are not always our best friends. They can, for example, create clever reasons why these commandments might not really mean what they say, that we can love, more or less, and make God happy. Make God love us more. Putting on the mind of Christ, we can see that our feeble efforts, always short of the goal, are not the point. The point is God's all-encompassing love, through which we might just have the hope of responding in kind. If we love God with all our minds, we're willing to forsake position, power, prestige, because they just aren't important. The mind of God places its treasures in the Kingdom of God.

And then there's the neighbor. To love our neighbor as ourselves. If we live in a nice house and go out to dinner sometimes, and children in Somalia are dying of hunger, have we flunked this test? Yes, we have. We have. If we ignore our neighbors who are being evicted when our mortgage is secure. If we have more than enough clothes when others are cold in winter. If we can buy a new car when others can't afford gas. This list has no end. And we fall short. We live in a complex and conflicted world, we are lulled by relative comfort into forgetfulness, we throw up our hands because these challenges are impossible to meet.

The two great commandments are simple, but not easy. And they have teeth: they are tough, and costly. Basically, we don't comply, and it's fair to say, most of the time, that we can't. Do we then turn away? Or do we acknowledge God's infinite love for us as well as for our neighbor, realize that what we're called to is always more than what we think we're able to do, and see that THIS is good news?

The secret is to want to live these commandments, no matter how fallible we are. The secret is in what we desire. As for the seeming impossibility of even attempting to live this way, ironically, we would have to die to the idea that WE can pull it off. We would have to die to ourselves, and face the crucifixion of our self-sufficiency. To love with that little word, "all", costs all that we've got. Everything. God asks no less. God asks for all. Do we dare? Do you dare to believe in a resurrection in your own life on the other side of that death to self, that emptying, giving, surrendering love?

"All" Only "all".

Proper 26 Year A

Date: October 30, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Eliza Linley

Old Testament Lesson: Joshua 3:7-17

Psalm: 107:1-7, 33-37

New Testament Lesson: I Thessalonians 2:9-13

Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Sermon

From C.S. Lewis' "Screwtape Proposes a Toast", (1959, Saturday Evening Post)

*Fill your glasses. What is this I see? What is this delicious bouquet I inhale? Can it be? Mr. Principal, I unsay all my hard words about the dinner. I see, and smell, that even under wartime conditions the College cellar still has a few dozen of sound old vintage **Pharisee!** Well, well, well. This is like old times. Hold it beneath your noses for a moment, gentledevils. Hold it up to the light. Look at those fiery streaks that writhe and tangle in its dark heart, as if they were contending. And so they are. You know how this wine is blended? Different types of Pharisee have been harvested, trodden, and fermented together to produce its subtle flavour. Types that were most antagonistic to one another on Earth. Some were all rules and relics and rosaries; others were all drab clothes, long faces, and petty traditional abstinences from wine or cards or the theatre. Both had in common their self-righteousness and an almost infinite distance between their actual outlook and anything the Enemy really is or commands. The wickedness of other religions was the really live doctrine in the religion of each; slander was its gospel and denigration its litany. How they hated each other up where the sun shone! How much more they hate each other now that they are forever conjoined but not reconciled. Their astonishment, their resentment, at the combination, the festering of their eternally impenitent spite, passing into our spiritual digestion, will work like fire. Dark fire. All said and done, my friends, it will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by "Religion" ever vanishes from the Earth. **It can still send us the truly delicious sins. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.***

So. On the Sunday before our rector returns from sabbatical, we have a gospel in which Jesus sternly enjoins his hearers not to call anyone "father", because we have one Father, in heaven. And not to call anyone "teacher", because Jesus is our teacher. What are we to do with this text, we who are the faithful remnant of the institutional church? Whether these words spring from Jesus himself or from Matthew, they are gospel – the good news, the real deal, and, as such, are surely worthy of being paid attention to more than all the canons of the church combined, right? The part we heard of this passage is only the beginning. We didn't even read "Woe to you, you hypocrites!", which Jesus repeats four times BEFORE calling the Pharisees a brood of vipers, sentenced to hell.

What's the application of this passage for us? Could be it's referring to someone else...someone worse than we are in our little church. After all, we're pretty accepting. Maybe it has more of an application today for political parties; they seem to be pretty intolerant. Especially the one I don't belong to! On the other hand, you can bet the Pharisees couldn't understand why he was talking about them. They tried so hard to be good! And to tell others how THEY could be good people, too! They were the ones who strove to protect Jewish religious and cultural life in the midst of Hellenistic Roman society. Food, purity laws and practice were what kept the Jewish community together. Jesus even says that people should do what the Pharisees teach, as they are the inheritors of Moses' legitimate authority. Yet his words to them are harsher by far than anything he has to say about the Romans. He accuses the Pharisees of self-promotion rather than leadership, of keeping to the letter of the Law but not to its spirit, of neglecting mercy and justice in favor of legalism and clericalism. But then, the rabbis themselves criticized this kind of behavior. It wasn't every scribe and Pharisee that was guilty.

Indeed, every generation produces leaders of all kinds, be it Judaism of the first century, the early church, the church of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, down to the church today. Every age has seen those whose vocations are not in congruence with the gospel, a tipoff that Jesus is not really talking to the Pharisees, but to us. And it is so easy to go down this road. Look at the trouble they're in at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where, this past week, the dean said the economic protesters could not be thrown off church property. But then, there were too many of them. They shut down the church so worship couldn't be held. And the church blinked, threatening the possibility of legal action unless the protesters moved. The canon chancellor resigned rather than be part of a structure that might authorize the use of violence. How does the church live faithfully in the face of these stresses? How does the church avoid the trap of serving, not God, but appearances and the news media? In some parishes, people are reluctant to join the vestry for fear there might be controversy. In a recession, there might be conflict over scarce resources and accusations of serving the institution over and against the people God calls us to love and serve. Living faithfully is not easy!

Jesus' accusations against the Pharisees were not made at a time when society was stable and the future of Jewish society looked good, but at a time of incredible stress, a time when it was easy to mistake sinful behavior for what had to be done to avoid chaos. And conflict may just be the way we discern the difference between faithful living and idolatry.

In First Thessalonians, Paul had been criticized for being a tentmaker – someone who supports himself at a trade other than ministry while he preaches the gospel. Some thought he must not really trust that God would provide; that he was hedging his bets – not acting in faith – by keeping his day job. Yet his agenda was to avoid burdening the poor in his congregation in not asking them to support him, treating them more like members of his own family than like a flock he expected to support him.

So it's complicated for anyone who is charged with maintaining the church. Like our convention delegates, who will go next Friday and Saturday to "take their place in the councils of the church". Like our vestry, our capital campaign committee, anyone concerned with keeping the lights on and ministry happening. Sometimes it's just no fun, and sometimes we have to be willing to let the chips fall where they may in order to be faithful to the gospel. We have to be able to discern where the mandate of the gospel and needs of the institution are the same, and where they differ; what is of the kingdom and what is not. And in this work, Jesus says, some kinds of behavior are more helpful than others. Woe

betide those who wear broad phylacteries and long fringes! Those places of honor at the banquet! How would we say that today, or what kind of behavior would be a clue to the self-seeking Jesus is talking about? And why is this behavior sinful? It's not because it makes us look bad, but because it makes us blind. Jesus is not saying that it's just better to stay out of leadership, of places where you might be asked to be highly visible, but that servanthood is the only way to lead.

And the reward? Clearly, it's not respect. It's not esteem, or the happy thought that we might be holier than the next person. Or even the assurance of being right. It's not, goodness knows, the avoidance of conflict. The rewards of servant ministry are these: a real relationship with God. A real relationship, like Paul's, with the people in your community. The security of knowing that God is in charge. The joy of obedience to a call greater than our own needs. The knowledge that God will provide for our needs. The ultimate safety embedded in the risk of faithful living.

Sophia – Holy Wisdom Herself

Date: November 13, 2011

Preacher: Rev. Steve Ellis

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20

Psalm Amos 5:18-24

New Testament Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Gospel: Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon

Amos has the imagination of Stephen King! He's talking to people who think God is on their side when they ought to be, in their prayers, asking if they are truly on God's side. How may my living please you, loving God? Am I, in my habits, living honestly and faithfully toward you? Is my living full of gratitude, are my dealings with others honest, do I live according to the wisdom I've been given and do the good and just things I've been taught to do?

Amos thinks they are complacent without being faithful, and he says they better hope judgement waits until they make some changes, because there is no escape from the way your life turns out, no escape from the kind of person you turned out to be. If you've neglected God and the habits of faithfulness until the day God asks you what you've done with your life, there will be nothing you can

say. Running from a lion you meet a bear, slipping into the house where the bear can't get you and resting against a wall, finally feeling you've escaped, a snake bites you. It really could be Stephen King!

Amos went to those who thought they had it made to say in every way he could: God doesn't want lip-service, but just humble, habitual walking with God. That gets us ready to hear God's voice in greater things.

Matthew says pretty much the same thing in Jesus' parable of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids. "Don't fritter your life away!" You know those dreams in which you realize that it is almost the end of the semester and you suddenly remember that there is a class that you haven't even cracked a book for yet? That feeling of panic? Or was I the only one who had those? Jesus is saying that we all too often take our lives for granted, as if they meant nothing, and fritter them away.

Knowing God, walking with God, being a blessing are for doing in this life – unless we are just telling God we got the invitation, but we are too busy to come to eternal life, the heavenly banquet, in this life and the next. "I'd love to come to the wedding," we say, "but my own concerns take precedence, and I'll come if I have time for you after I've arranged my life to please me." Don't think it is Jesus slamming the door on people. No, this is about foolish bridesmaids who missed their lives because they weren't looking to walk with God, and so real life passed them by. They hadn't built the habits of prayer and friendship with God. They hadn't learned to want the good and do it. They hadn't learned to forgive and welcome others, and they hadn't learned to give and receive generously. Such pathways had not been laid down in their brains and strengthened and deepened over time, and were not becoming their character.

Holy Wisdom isn't like that. Personified in today's canticle from the Wisdom of Solomon, and in Proverbs and Baruch, she is the image not of spiritual heights, but of the basic layer of obedience and humility that form Christian character. Several times personified as an image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the New Testament she becomes part of the image of Christ as the Word of God incarnate.

Those who receive her teaching – obediently – lay down a layer of prudence and habit and character that allows them to move on toward maturity in every dimension of their lives, and be constructive members of community, wholesome and strong, ready for whatever difficulties might come along, ready to enjoy the good things of this life, too. Such people become the wise bridesmaids – they don't miss the party.

At Gladstone Library in Wales, where I spent part of my sabbatical, they have recently commissioned a remarkable statue of Sophia, Holy Wisdom, in a Welsh way, looking a bit like a dryad, a tree-spirit in her feet, a strong woman (as the Scriptural images say) looking for those who need instruction, to guide them, teach them God's ways, because she's an image of God who seeks us, to teach and form and heal our inner life.

I think we sometimes think of the spiritual life as a smorgasbord from which we may select those things that intrigue us, here and there. I think God thinks of the spiritual life simply as our lives, which need structure and shape on which the greater capacities can be layered. We all need honesty, study, service, giving and worship to be steady components of our lives, or there will be instability in our

foundations and what we build will lack integrity. Holy Wisdom is God seeking us out to nurture and form our character and habits.

Offer yourself for instruction and Wisdom (who has been waiting for you, maybe even nagging at you a bit) will nurture you, form you, and bring you along. Let your daily prayers include the self-oblation, “Lord, what would you teach me, today? What would you have me do?” And as you come to the Communion today, place your life on the altar, at least as much of it as you can today, and ask God to give it back as the life of Christ, formed and fashioned in some new way by Holy Wisdom, into a fuller expression of your humanity, made a bit stronger and a bit more wholesome by the life of God in you.

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 (completed in June 2009). And then I stayed. What can I say? One of St. John's charms is friendliness.

My husband, David Richardson, and I have 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. Catherine Keyser-Mary, 60

Rev. Eliza Linley, 7, 34, 74, 77, 81, 84, 91

Rev. Steve Ellis, 3, 9, 14, 20, 23, 30, 39, 43, 49,
55, 62, 67, 72, 87, 90

Rev. Stu Schlegel, 17, 27, 46, 53, 91