

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

First Sunday of Lent
February 10, 2008
Fr. Bill McGinty

“For Whom We Serve!”

Welcome to this the First Sunday in Lent; away have gone to bright colors of Epiphany to be replaced by the more sober purple of Lent. It is a color that we so associate with Lent that it has taken on that meaning also in the rest of our lives. Purple stands for sorrow, repentance and reconciliation.

The readings today want to educate us about the nature of our salvation, so they take us back to the beginning. In that beginning Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the Tree of Wisdom and disobey God.

The story had enormous significance for every Hebrew who cared about God and his faith. It answered a crucial question for them: “Why do we constantly make the wrong choice?” Why do we choose what is bad rather than what is good? Why are we so smart about so many things, but when it comes to right and wrong we have this tendency choose the wrong.

Many Christians of course so worried about this result of Original Sin that they took themselves off into the desert to live a life of solitude and tranquility. There they sought a life free of temptation where sin did not play a part.

It has become a part of our Episcopal tradition that we prefer to look at the better side of human nature. Instead of an emphasis on sin and man’s wrong doing, we emphase how God’s grace changes us for the better and lifts us to a new level. Perhaps this is what attracts so many people to the Episcopal church instead of being judgmental about sin, we begin with the belief: “yes, we are sinners, yes we are in need of redemption, but we acknowledge that, and we embrace Christ’s salvation, by embracing his grace, won upon the cross for us, but most of all we show that we are one with Christ by seeking to do his work.

Ministry, outreach, volunteering, giving of ourselves is our way of saying and demonstrating that our faith is not mere words, but is a conviction that we who are recipients of his grace, believe to the extent that we refuse to allow his salvation to die on the cross, but we prefer to carry that saving grace into the rest of our life and work.

The life of grace is so important; it is our way to tap into Christ, his mission and his ministry. That acceptance and encounter with Christ in our life is a transforming experience. Paul speaks of this in today’s letter to the Romans. He speaks of grace as a free gift, a free gift that abounds for all.

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Free gifts are something we at times ignore. In the case of grace we know that is a mistake. Deep in our hearts we realize that with prayer and intent we should truly ask more of God when we are in need. Instead we rely on our own efforts much too much.

Jesus in today's Gospel reflects all that we have just said. In that well known story of 'the Temptations', he too is led into the desert. There he prays, but the desert, the solitude and the life of contemplation is not for Jesus. His mission is to do the will of his father. His mission is to be in and for the world.

The story tells us that God's way is not a lottery. It is not chance, it is God's plan. God's way is not about magic and it is not about the worship and accumulation of things. The way that Christ chooses is the way of his Father. He walks among God's people and shares what they eat, works at what they work at, and teaches them the wisdom of God.

Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve sought wisdom, but because of disobedience found only death instead. Jesus teaches his disciples true wisdom. He teaches that true obedience to God our Father, is found in our response of love. Servants and slaves do things because they have to do it. But friends, sons and daughters do things out of love. Jesus gives many examples of this from the quote in John 15: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is about. No. I call you friends." To the teaching that 'if your child asks for bread will you give him a stone?'

The wisdom of God lies in the fact that our love is not arbitrary, rather our love is relational. We love because God is our Father, the reason for our being and the author of our salvation. Our love, expressed in "What we do in bringing about his Kingdom," is the ultimate affirmation of our faith.

It's always nice to be able to give an example of that transformation in our lives, because when we see it we recognize it and admire it. No one seems to be able to tell me when Betty Stark first came to the parish. All that anyone says is: "She was here before I got here. That has to be more than 40 years ago."

Betty died Tuesday, February 5th. For those 40 years she was a faithful member of the Altar Guild. Most people think they know what the Altar Guild does, but in truth they do not.

Altar Guild members do not think in the same way that we do. They think of the Sanctuary as a holy place and the Altar as the throne of God. They will come early in the morning or late in the evening, to serve in this holy space. They never use excuses, about time, or stress, their favorite TV program, or being too tired. Like sentries outside Buckingham Palace or US Marines at the White House, they stand ready to guard and serve.

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Betty was one such loyal and devoted Altar Guild member. When she saw something that needed attention, she took care of it. The Altar clothes, the hangings, flowers, the Altar rail, the elements or the candles. Each in their turn received her attention.

Altar Guild members do not look for appreciation or thanks, although they will accept it if and when it comes. They work for a higher power. They serve a King. Neither can they turn stone into bread, perform miracles or build up treasures for themselves, but they can make things reverend, produce a sense of the holy, and make all the work they do a prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence.

Altar Guild members use words like honor, privilege and sacrifice, words that the rest of us take for granted. Betty Stark was an Altar Guild member. Just as Jesus went into the desert to seek silence and prayer, Altar Guild members work in silence and communicate in whispers. They walk softly and never rush. They help each other, young and old. They carry and fetch and never retire. Altar Guild members do not retire, they wait upon their Lord 24:7. Betty Stark was an Altar Guild member.

When an Altar Guild member dies they pass from one holy place to another holy place, where their King waits upon them.

There choirs sing their praises, saints rise early to wait upon them. No more do their old and wrinkled hands smell of brass polish or their shoes shine with candle wax. Now angels carry them across a sacred and holy space. For they too know what it means to stand hour after hour and serve a King. Betty Stark served a King.

And when they tire Altar Guild members never complain. When they see others leave disorder after all their careful work, they simply put it right for they know who they truly serve. Seasons come and go, summers too hot, winters too cold, spring something to do and fall getting too dark. But not for the Altar Guild members, hot, cold, things to do, or darkness, she will be here to serve her Lord. Not for her such seasons. Her seasons are Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Her colors are blue and gold, green and purple and red. She weaves a rainbow of days, days when she served and Christ, her Christ was adorned in color and splendor. Betty Stark was an Altar Guild member; forty years ago and only last week. She is an Altar Guild member today, standing at the throne of her King. Oh he has pulled up a chair that she may rest those old legs of hers, but she will not let herself rest for long, for she is an Altar Guild member.

In this season of Lent let us all remind ourselves who we serve. Let us reach for our Holy Bible and read of the wisdom God bestows on us. Let us embrace his grace as we embrace his cross determined that we too can serve in any capacity to bring his Kingdom about.

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And may God our Father bless Betty Stark and give her peace eternal rest grant on to her,
and may the souls of all rest in his eternal Kingdom.

Amen+

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