

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

5 Epiphany
February 4, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“God’s Rogues”

Today’s readings are all about “the call of God” in our lives. It is a call that comes to each one of us at sometime. Years ago, we tended to regard “the call of the Gospel”, as applying to certain individuals or as a call to priesthood or some kind of ordained ministry. That kind of thinking has been replaced with the concept that each one of us is called by virtue of our “Baptism” to follow Christ in the everyday of our life.

Even when we accept and internalize that teaching, it is difficult for us to conceptualize the idea that we have a place and are an intricate part of God’s plan. The same dilemma faces Isaiah, Paul and the Apostles in today’s readings.

For thousands of years, that call so disturbed many good Christians that they left everything and went to monasteries or some kind of religious life. In the 16th and 17th centuries two figures stand out who rebelled against that thinking. One was Martin Luther and the other was Francis De Sales. Francis was the Bishop of Geneva. It was not an easy assignment, because Geneva was a Calvinist City ruled by John Calvin the Reformer.

Throughout his life Francis counseled and advised thousands of people about the spiritual life. His advice was centuries ahead of his contemporaries. He did not believe in Puritanism or even the strict rules of Institutional Churches. He believed in the true spirit of Christ and the joy of following his teaching. Faced with people who wanted to fast and punish themselves for their sins, Francis took a different approach. He told them that salvation is not found in heavy penance and in taking all the joy out of life. Salvation is found in doing the ordinary things of life well. Nor does prayer alone make you a holy person, but rather allowing God’s love in your life to overflow so that it touches the lives of others.

It is little wonder that Francis is loved as the gentle saint of ordinary people. His book “*Introduction to the devout life,*” became a spiritual classic and is still read widely today.

In the February copy of Diocesan life Bishop Paul invites everyone in the Diocese to join him for a Lenten fast. He suggests that we all do not eat food on Fridays in Lent and only drink water. He further enjoins us to unplug our television set on Ash Wednesday and not switch it back on until Easter Sunday.

It is easy to see where Bishop Paul’s thinking has taken him, faced with the excesses of our consumer society, where we can have anything, anytime we want it. He thinks that we need to rediscover “fasting” and going without, in order to identify with our brothers and sisters in Africa. Further, he suggests that we collect the money we save and send it to them.

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Many of you may well agree with the Bishop and decide that is the way to go this Lent, and that Friday will be a no food day and television will be banned. But I wonder what the good saint of Geneva would say when faced with the same dilemma.

Certainly, I feel that he would say: “do something to remind yourself that this is Lent.” But I also think that he would want us to take a positive approach as well.

How can we as individuals and as a community bring the love of God, taught by Jesus, more overtly into our lives in the Lenten season? In other words, instead of thinking what we shouldn't do, how can we pass on the good deed, the act of generosity, the commitment to serve, the kindness to a neighbor, the effort to forgive and the challenge that Jesus invites us to in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount?

When we begin to think in Francis' way of love, we really have a different take on Jesus' call of the Apostles, “Come follow him.” The invitation is not an invitation to heroics, or to some grand mission, such as Paul's. It is an invitation to a lifestyle where each one of us strives to be better, better as people, better in spirit, better than we ever have been in the past.

We belong to a religion of “starting over” and new beginnings. The whole concept of Resurrection invites us to re-invent ourselves on an annual basis. I think that as we get older, we realize this more and more. The measure of our growth is not found in our achievements or faith alone, but in our capacity for love.

Some of you may have been party to watching the same Oprah Winfrey show as I did, in the last week. The show really told a story and as the story unfolded it became clear that it really was about “Gospel love” and the capacity to go the extra mile.

A woman in Charlotte, North Carolina went one day to her church Concert Hall to hear a choir from Liberia in West Africa. Her name was Elaine and she was a Christian lady married with two young daughters. The choir was made up of some twelve teenager boys who sang in perfect harmony.

Their director told the audience that they came from an orphanage in Liberia and this tour was their annual fundraiser. All their parents had been killed in the Liberia civil war.

As she listened to the beauty of their singing, Elaine claims:” suddenly God touched my heart and I found myself weeping.” Afterwards she spent time with the boys particularly two of them. Later in the evening she phoned her husband to ask him if he would consider adopting both boys into their family. His reaction was to tell her that she needed to slow down and give herself time to think about what she was contemplating. But days later the decision was made and the boys were adopted.

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Instantly her many friends formed a united front of opposition in telling her that she was 'out of her mind.' For no person in their right mind would introduce two teenage boys into a house hold with two small girls.

But all their protests fell on deaf ears. Age, color, culture shock, Elaine had but one answer. God had spoken to her heart, these boys needed a mother and now they have one.

Instead, she invited them to the concert the whole 12 boys were doing the very next weekend. Despite their opposition all the couples went. When the weekend was over the five families had adopted all twelve boys.

If that was not enough, one family adopted four boys, two of them brothers. They then sent for their two sisters back in the orphanage in Liberia and adopted them as well.

For people who called themselves 'empty nesters.' This was an extraordinary thing to do. Amid all the many questions Oprah had for the families, came back the sober reality that at times things could be difficult; lives had to be adjusted and sacrifices made, but in the end there was little that love, real love could not overcome.

There is an important lesson, "Love does conquer all."

The story of the Gospel is the story of Jesus' invitation to follow him. We make a mistake when we think that invitation only comes once in our lives or is limited to what we do in church. We meet Christ in the most unexpected places whether it is the local prison, a law office, the face of the child at school or at the local town planning meeting. Our opportunities for doing good, following Christ, and living out our Christianity are all around us giving us each day opportunities to become that better person that God calls us to be.

Simon Peter learns that lesson in today's Gospel, as do Isaiah in the Old Testament and Paul in the Epistle. Maybe we too hesitate to become too involved with this person Christ. We feel unworthy to be around pure love and so much goodness. Do you ever feel that? Is just thinking of all the stuff you did in college days or growing up, so bad that it turns your hair grey?

Do you ever find yourself saying: "It's easy for him talking about prayers and being good, he thinks a joint is an old building and he was not at Woodstock.

Peter, Paul and Isaiah in today's readings also feel like the three stooges. "Why us?" they ask. "Don't you know we are not worthy? We are unclean. We cannot be like you/"

And perhaps that is exactly the point. God does not choose us because we are perfect. He chooses us because there is a job to be done and we are the only ones, in his plan who can do it. In a sense that may well make us "God's Rogues." Not perfect, but touched and chosen for a bigger purpose than we would ever choose for ourselves.

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This old church has seen many changes in the last five years. The role that God has given each one of you in those changes has been unique to you. Whether you have been involved in design, maintenance, fundraising or simply cleaning up the mess that others have made, you have to realize that you are part of something that is bigger than any one of us. You are part of Christ's living church and each day now and in the future he is calling you: "Come and follow me."

Responding to that call should, as Francis taught us, bring joy and happiness into our lives and enrich us day by day.

Amen

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