

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

5 Easter  
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Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Love One Another! Keep Out of the Swamps”**

We are beginning to enter a time of public forums, when all the candidates for the Presidency and every other political office begin to air their views in the hope that the great American Public will give them their support and vote.

Whether you are Republican or Democrat at this early stage of the proceedings, doesn't appear to matter. What we do look for is how individuals stand on a whole host of issues from foreign affairs to the economy, and from crime to immigration. Moral ethical topics make the papers as well, from abortion to the death penalty, health costs to global warming.

As we sit back and listen to the T.V. and radio pundits and their assessment of the candidates, I am always amused by the way individuals change their stance on important moral issues simply because public opinion has changed or it will attract more votes.

How different it is with Jesus and the Gospel. He begins his ministry teaching about God, the Kingdom of heaven and the love, forgiveness and courage that is needed to belong to that Kingdom. His teaching does not change. It is summarized in today's Gospel reading, with the words: "I give you a new commandment that you love one another."

The Jews are amazed at Jesus' teaching, because they say: "He teaches with authority." Nor does his teaching favor one group, one class, or one culture; rather Jesus' teaching steers clear of politics and is a teaching of the heart. To a degree it is as if the warmth, care and love of the family unit are externalized to include all who we encounter in our daily life. Jesus is taking his own experience of love both as a member of the Trinity and as the Son of Mary and Joseph and passing it on to others.

When we examine Jesus' commandment: "Love one another," we have to ask: "What did he mean?" Did he mean love each other like son and mother, brother and sister, father and daughter? But he adds: "As I have loved you."

Jesus loved his disciples, in that he chose them, taught them, cared for them and then gave them confidence by sending them out on a mission to preach his word. When they doubt, fail or run away, he forgives them and helps them to begin again.

Jesus' love sets his disciples free to seek for the Kingdom that he taught about and strive for a higher kind of fulfillment. In doing this, Jesus teaches them that true happiness can be found in giving away the love and wisdom you have found by passing it to others. It is

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector  
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337  
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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so much the opposite to what the world dictates where we are taught to win things for ourselves albeit, success, fame, money or property and to hoard it.

St John in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading speaks of an ideal time when the pain and suffering of this life will be replaced by the healing touch and mercy of God. John's church has suffered greatly over a twenty year period. In church history they are called the "Seven Churches of Asia Minor." The most important of these churches lies in the city of Ephesus on the coast and the other six communities are clustered around Antioch in the north. For 20 years the Christians have been persecuted, imprisoned and killed in a terror campaign worse than any that took place in Rome. John does not promise them an end to their suffering. He does tell them that all their pain and spilt blood has meaning and that one day people will read of them and be inspired to ask the question: "Who is this God, that these people so love and honor that they are prepared to endure all, suffer all, cling to believe, and languish in prison, and even die for? Where do you find love like this?"

When the church today and the lectionary chose these readings for us, on this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter they are posing the same question of us. Do you know of the love that Christ speaks when he says "love one another." St Paul says: "We can all say: "Jesus is Lord, and Jesus I love you, but it means nothing unless we transfer that love to our neighbors and those we live, work and worship with and those who have nothing, not even love in their life."

Recently, Bishop Paul has been writing to his clergy about the state of some of the parishes in the Diocese. This week he replied to one lady from the North, who wished to blame the Diocesan office and Bethlehem for the state of her parish. Reading this sad lament, Paul comments that he hopes he has retired before this parish dies and then closes.

The letter reminded me of an Article written by the Archdeacon some years ago about all the things that can go wrong in a parish setting, which can stop church growth and lead to decline or worse. He called his fictitious parish "The church of St. Swithin's in the Swamp."

In his story, he talks about how a once vibrant and actively growing congregation falls into decline because they lost their focus and they lost their story. I remember when the article came out in *Episcopal Life*, how several parishioners pointed it out to me, as if to say: "that could have been us," or even "that was us."

In St. Swithins, decline begins when the Rector takes his eye off the ball and becomes distracted by other things. The parish begins to fragment as different groups begin to follow their own agenda. Eventually, this leads to conflict and division with everyone fighting for their own plan, and unwilling to listen to others. Whichever side the Pastor now supports, alienates the others, who up and leave. St. Swithin's starts its sad decline.

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Reading this, I can remember imagining Jesus entering that church and walking down the aisle unseen. Unseen because so many people had turned the spotlight of their love on themselves and their group and forgot where the light and the love came from, in the first place. We can learn a lot today from St. Swithin's.

We should today, sitting here, all know who the spotlight should be on. It should be on Jesus Christ. We all know which agenda we are to follow; it is the teaching of Jesus, the teaching that does not change. Anyone who thinks that their plan is a better one is looking to live in the swamp, because Christ's agenda begins with love one another, serving one another, treating one another as you would treat Him.

It is so tempting for all of us at times to think that what happens in ministry, outreach and in our parish setting is entirely down to us. We should know that the opposite is the case. What happens, where Christ chooses to be, is entirely down to God and his Holy Spirit.

Bishop Paul in his letter this week says: "The deep concern I have is that people believe that the problems parishes have lie outside themselves. I consider it to be a death knell. A parish has to adopt a different stance towards life as disciples. Our commitment to fellowship, mission and stewardship sets the bar above which the parish cannot rise."

That is a great statement and it is fully supported in today's Gospel by Jesus' words: "Love one another and you will be my disciples."

Today, we have so many examples in the parish of that love and that discipleship. We might not always agree, or even see things the same, but we must all keep on looking to the center and to the person of Jesus. As your Rector, I will make no apology for insisting that his agenda will be our agenda and to him will go the glory, thanks and praise.

Amen+

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