

SERMON

Pentecost XIV – 8/29/10 – Hebrews 13:15-16

“What Do You Give the God Who Has Everything?”

President of Princeton and Governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson, was elected President of the United States in 1912. Sometime after the election, he visited his elderly aunt who was hard-of-hearing and somewhat less than current. She asked him where he was working now. He shouted into the hearing aid of the day, her ear trumpet, “I’M THE PRESIDENT.” She replied, “Of what?” He shouted back, “OF THE U.S.A.,” to which she replied, “Don’t be silly.” Elderly aunts have a license to interject humility in the best of us. My father told the story of an incident when he was about 18. He was standing around at some family gathering, and for the first time he was openly smoking with the men of the family. His grandmother spotted him and walked by and said, “I suppose you think you’re a big man now.” I think he loved the story more later in his life than he did when it happened.

Today’s Gospel reading is about Jesus taking on the practice of humility. Luke likes to use meals as the setting for important events. In this case, Jesus was invited to dinner by the head of the Pharisees. Luke says that they were watching him closely. However, he was watching them closely, too, and he noticed that people were jockeying for position at the head of the table. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. After he told the parable, Jesus then introduced one of his great reversals of the norm: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Gratitude and its twin, humility, are the foundation stones of the Christian spiritual life. If we can begin to comprehend the immensity of what God had done for all humanity in Jesus Christ, and if we have any sense of appreciation for the gift of life and the blessings and joy of life even in the midst of life’s challenges, is there something that we may do in grateful response? Does God need anything? What do you give the God who has everything – the God who is in everything?

Today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews 13:15-16, suggests two things, and, as with all spiritual things, they are simple. The first thing is noted in verse 15: “Through [Christ], then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. A “sacrifice of praise” simply means that we begin to live out the acknowledgement that God is the center of the universe, indeed, the source of all being. We desire God to be the center of our lives. Let’s face it, all of us think of ourselves at the center of the universe. Everything takes place around for and to us. That is the human condition. It’s all about us! But it is not all about us. First and foremost it is about God, and then other people have to come in there someplace, so at the very least, “the sacrifice of praise” meant that the center of our universe expands to include room for God and others. It is a kind of trinity- God, others, us. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, with all your heart, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) The biblical language calls this a sacrifice in that we are giving up our place at the head of the table to God and ask others to join us in the great banquet of divine love.

This is underscored by the next verse in the Hebrews text when it reads, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

The Very Rev. Sam Candler, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, several years ago led a Spirituality Conference at Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina. One of his topics was “The Way of Blessing – How God’s hope is to bless the world through the church.” This struck me as such a penetrating thought. Having blessed us with this life and life eternal, God has gathered us in the church – not for our own amusement and amazement, but to be a blessing to the world. God has given us this church to bless the world. There apparently is one thing God lacks – you and me, and all of the people of the world. The church has been called to be a blessing to the world. This church is called to be a blessing to the world. We have received that blessing through the work and ministry of others, or we wouldn’t be here. Let Bethesda-by-the-Sea continue to radiate blessing into the world. What a calling! What a challenge! What gifts our time, our energy, our will, our generosity will be, individually and as a community. It is our legacy to see to it that the light of Christ shines

from the beacon tower of this place for generations to come! That is our gift to the God who has everything.

The Rev'd Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Pentecost XIII – 8/22/10 – Luke 13:10-17

“Above the Law”

Trustworthy. Loyal. Helpful. Friendly. Courteous. Kind. Obedient. Cheerful. Thrifty. Brave. Clean. Reverent. Let me see the hands of those who know where these words originate. It is the Boy Scout Law. The introductory phrase is: A Scout is: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. Not a bad set of characteristics for good citizens. Is being a Boy Scout the same as being a Christian? There certainly are Boy Scouts who are Christians, but there are Boy Scouts who represent a variety of religious traditions who can say the Scout Law with pride. What about the Ten Commandments. If asked to identify what it means to be a Christian, some people will answer “obeying the Ten Commandments.” Christians may be expected to abide by the Ten Commandments, but is that the essence of being a Christian? The Ten Commandments belong to Judaism as much as to Christianity. There are probably many other people, with or without religious identity, who think the Ten Commandments are a good idea. Many cultures have versions of these moral principles.

Today’s gospel, however, speaks to the issue of reducing the spiritual life to a set of laws, rules and regulations. If you have been listening to and reading the Gospels for some time you will have noted that Jesus frequently got into trouble with the religious leaders of his day over religious laws. They complained that he often broke them. In the reading today, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue and a woman showed up who was terribly bent over with some severe spinal condition. She had this affliction for 18 years. It is hard to imagine the suffering this woman went through, bent in half for all that time. Jesus laid his hands on her, and she stood up straight for the first time in 18 years.

Unwilling to confront Jesus directly, the president of the synagogue began to tell the crowd that healing should not be done, or expected, on the Sabbath. It was against the Law, the Fourth of the Ten Commandments to be specific. In fact, Jesus broke several religious laws of the time. First, he noticed the woman. In order to avoid distraction, women were supposed to be invisible to the men in the synagogue. Second, he touched her without knowing whether or not she was ritually unclean. Third, he healed her, which isn’t counted among the things you are allowed to do on the Sabbath. The president of the synagogue was saying, “Wait until tomorrow to heal her, just don’t do it today on the Sabbath. Fulfill the law, first, and then do your healing.”

Let’s look at the Fourth Commandment: Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work -- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it (Exodus 20:8-11). Hmmm, you say. That seems pretty clear. Maybe the president of the synagogue had a point. Why couldn’t Jesus have waited till the next day to heal the woman? She had this affliction for 18 years; one more day shouldn’t have mattered too much. Good legalistic thinking! But why should she? Jesus didn’t seem to think the woman should suffer another minute, and he sharply criticized the president of the synagogue. He knew that that man and anybody there, for that matter, would have untied their donkeys on the Sabbath to let them drink water. Now, the donkeys wouldn’t have died if they went without water for one day, besides, water could be put out for the animal before the Sabbath. Yet the president of the synagogue essentially was saying that healing the woman was more of a breach of the Sabbath law than watering an animal.

There were dozens of rules about keeping the Sabbath as the rabbis tried to define appropriate behavior. They said that if you carried something with your palms up, it is considered work. If you carried something with your palms down, it was not work. If you carried something on the back of your hands, it was not work. By the way, if any of you are thinking

of stopping by your office this afternoon, I would remind you that the 15th Chapter, verse 32 of the book of Numbers, will require us to stone you to death. However, not to worry, because Sunday, as the first day of the week, is not the Old Testament Sabbath- but you had better be careful if you worked yesterday.

The problem is that the Law, whether or not it is the Ten Commandments, the Boy Scout Law, or any set of behavioral codes, is not the equivalent of the life in Christ. Societies must have laws; that is not what I am talking about today. Acceptable social behavior has customs, politeness and morality. But social custom and civil law are not the means by which we identify the life in Christ. These things are never enough! It is not possible to write a rule or regulation to cover every aspect and nuance of life. The Christian is called to live above the law, beyond rules and regulations, indeed even above and beyond common morality.

The Christian life is defined by what Jesus called “love.” The loving thing to do was to free the woman from her affliction immediately. Waiting a single day just to fulfill a religious obligation was preposterous to Jesus. In other places, when Jesus was criticized for doing things on the Sabbath, he pointed out that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. . Remember the incident when Peter asked Jesus if he was required to forgive someone seven times – a stretch for Peter and the rest of us, for that matter. Jesus’ reply was, “Seventy seven times,” (Matt. 18:22) which was his way of saying we can’t make rules about forgiveness and love.

The Christian life is one of boundless, abundant, extravagant, generous love, not an account book of rules to be followed. Making the Christian life into rules will always fall short of the mark of Christian love. It is a life, a spirit, a manner of being, the quality of relationship between ourselves and God, others, and within ourselves. Rule keepers are terrible lovers. They keep count. They weigh and measure. They give 50% when sometimes the situation may call for 99%. They have always done enough because they kept the rules.

Remember how Jesus’ summarized all the religious law and the teaching of the prophets? Love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Ten Commandments and all hundreds of rules people have made from them, indeed all of life, is captured in one phrase about life: love God, love others, love self. The life in Christ involves infinite possibilities which are impossible to reduce to rules and laws. St. Paul said, “[Christ] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity...” (Gal. 2:15) and, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (Rom. 13:8) The life of love is above the law.

- The Rev’d Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Pentecost XI – 8/8/10 – Luke 12:32-40

“The Eternal Arrives”

Part II – Now

“You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” There is an element among some Christians who are fixated on the Second Coming of Christ. Essentially they say, “Forget about what is going on now, pay attention to then.” I say, “Forget about the then, is Jesus dwelling in and living through your heart and life now? We are called to live into the first coming. Waiting for Jesus to come some day, even if you think it is soon, creates an atmosphere that says, “Forget the world and its needs today. Forget the poor, forget peace, forget hunger, forget illness, forget about oil spills in the Gulf. Jesus may come any day so none of it matters. Believe me, if Jesus arrived today, he will not be happy to find us waiting. He expects us to be working - to be doing something to relieve the suffering in Haiti, about the community around St. George’s in Riviera Beach, about ministering to our divorcing friends and to our sick neighbor, to awaken to the gospel that has already come more and more into the midst of the suffering of the world where you live and have your being. When the Psalmist said, “The Lord is near to all who call on him...” (Psalm 145:18) he didn’t mean soon, he meant now, near like the person next to you or in front of you. When Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is near,” he didn’t mean “on the way,” he meant here, now.

One of the spiritual plagues in the western world over the centuries has been our obsession with linear time. Look at my watch. It is continually updated by a signal from a satellite, so that it is accurate within one billionth of a second. Is that

ridiculous, or what? There is a story of a European traveler in Tibet. He stopped in a remote village. One of the villagers noticed his watch and asked what it was. The translator had quite a time explaining what a watch does but finally got it across. The villager looked at the man with the watch and asked, "Why would you want one?" When Tibetan nomads plan a rendezvous, they simply say they will meet. There is no day or time mentioned. They all simply begin to show up, more or less at the same time, in the same place.

The great spiritual problem a modern world person has to contend with, are the dimensions of time which inhabit our minds: the past and the future. If this theme is beginning to sound familiar, I am glad. It is a message that I believe I am called to take with me wherever I go, like some spiritual Johnny Appleseed. I think it is of vital importance in our spiritual lives as Christians. I think I may have told this personal anecdote during the Lenten Pause this spring. Some years ago, Pam and I were in some wonderful part of the world – I have forgotten where. It may have been Cairo or Venice. It doesn't matter, other than it was a particularly compelling place. We were sitting talking, and the realization came to both of us that we were talking about where we would like to go on our next trip! There we were in this fabulous place, and yet, we were not there. That moment was an awakening about how little I lived in the present. The future takes up a lot of space in my head. Like many of you, I am also capable of living in the past in my head, another way to be absent from the present.

For many people, time is like an open book. On the left page is the past, and on the right page is the future, and the present is the little crevice in the middle. I am urging that we push the past and the future to the margins, and let the pages of our lives be filled with the present. Let me ask you this. Is there anyone here who knows how to change the past? I am serious, if you can, you should be up here instead of me. Well, then, is there anyone here who has managed to live in the future? Raise your hand ... apparently no one. So, let me get this straight. We spend how many mental hours a day focused on things over which we have no control or that haven't happened yet?

Jesus said, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin ... can any of you by worrying" – translate that, "by thinking" – "add a single hour to your span of life?" "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap ..." Jesus is such a powerful figure because he was totally present. That is why some of the gospel accounts seem to portray him reading minds. It isn't meant to imply supernatural power. Jesus was just so aware of the now that he noticed everything going on around him, every nuance in the people whom he met. Birds and flowers live in neither the past nor the future. The Eternal is to be met only in the now. Now is where God is. These are the moments of our lives. Wake up! Wake up out of the trance of the past and future and move into the present. No longer be absent from the present, be present to the present.

Are you truly aware of the beauty of this place or has it become invisible over time? If your hand is resting on the pew, let your fingers feel the texture of the wood. Notice the narrow line of dark pages in the middle of the Books of Common Prayer where a thousand hands have turned to the Eucharist. Walk by the lectern and see the feathers carved in the eagle. Feel the wafer in your hand, notice the chalice holding the wine. Just notice this present moment – simply wake up and be aware. Is there any flower or a bird in you who can live in the joy of the moment, the peaceful awareness of the present? Or are you a typical western human being who has a billionth of a second watch, who spends most of his or her time in the mind rehashing the past or reconfiguring the future trying to grow taller or live longer, or have more, or be different?

"You must be ready," Jesus said. Let it become part of your spiritual practice to notice when you are rummaging in the past or flitting into the future. "There I go again sliding into the past." Or, "Ah, there I am again wondering and wandering and worrying in the future." In those moments of awakening, the Eternal arrives. God is near - present. There is no time like the present for meeting the Eternal Presence. Indeed there truly is no time but the present. So if your life situation is worry-free and at peace, or if you are challenged with all manner of struggles in your life, pray this, "Let me be present to you now, O God, as you are present to me."

- The Rev'd Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: "Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. - Henri Nouwen

SERMON
Pentecost X – 8/1/10 – Luke 12:13-21
“The Eternal Arrives”
Part I – Nothing

I grew up with a small food warehouse in our basement called the “Fruit Cellar.” It was filled with jars of fruits, vegetables and chickens from my accountant father’s ample hobby garden and henhouse for which I was his reluctant gopher. My mother did the canning with a pressure cooker that was treated with all the respect of an unstable nuclear device that might detonate at any moment. When my father was drafted into the infantry at age 38 during WWII, there were over 700 jars and bottles of food in the fruit cellar. All that saw us through the two years my father was away. My mother grew up as the daughter of a coal miner’s widow. She married during the Great Depression. She knew about material insecurity. She could laugh about the groaning shelves in the basement, but they were there nonetheless. They were my mother’s security blanket. We would not go hungry.

The basement super market did not keep her from worrying.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us about one of the most difficult barriers that may come between us and God. We read about a man who wanted Jesus to arbitrate a family inheritance dispute, and then we heard Jesus’ reflection on possessions in a parable about a very successful landowner who just couldn’t stop accumulating and accumulating. Possessions and material security can be a major distraction from spiritual growth in the human condition. Common preaching practice would now suggest I launch into a tirade on greed and the evil of material possessions. That would be to miss the point completely. There is nothing inherently wrong with material possessions or wealth. Furthermore, wealth and material possessions are relative matters when it comes to personal responsibility in managing and using that wealth. The billionaire who does little to address the needs of the world and the homeless person who refuses to share his propane stove are suffering from the same human condition.

Beyond that, I don’t concur with the current spate of so called “prosperity gospels” that have arisen in some of the fundamentalist groups who hold that people with the right kind of faith will prosper materially. I have known too many highly spiritually developed people of faith who were materially poor. I have also known wealthy people who were spiritually bankrupt. Nobody deserves to be rich or poor because of their faith.

So, today’s gospel lesson will not be satisfied with yet another harangue on the evil of material possessions or with an assertion that the virtuous will be materially rewarded. Here is the greater issue: human nature makes the mistaken assumption that the temporary satisfactions and pleasures of material possessions can address our inner longing for something more in life. These temporary satisfactions can so easily take on the characteristics of addictions. Such satisfactions are short-lived, and they can’t possibly provide us with what we are really seeking. Shopping, buying, selling, owning, collecting, gathering, hoarding, all are momentary highs that ultimately can’t carry the spiritual freight people seek. So, like drugs, we have to keep gathering and getting over and over again.

The thing that made us happy today may be the source of our unhappiness tomorrow. “I’ve made it. I am the CEO of my company.” Talk to that same person in the middle of the night when his marriage has gone sour, his son has a drinking problem and the company stock has dropped 40 points. Or, “I’ve made it. I’ve been elected bishop!” Heaven forbid! Our own Bishop Frade has a take on that one. He has been heard to say, “Anyone who wants to be a bishop deserves it.” “I love my new car,” until it becomes just another car. “At last, our own home” – and then the roof leaks, the air conditioning unit breaks down, and the wind insurance goes up 100%.” Those things which give pleasure can also become that which gives us pain. “When I have new barns stuffed to the rafters, then I will really be happy,” says the man in the parable, until he gets the message, “You’re about to be dead!”

Many people who have had very serious news in their lives – illness, tragedy - will say, “When I heard that, my whole life changed. So many things that used to loom so large and important in my life, suddenly melted away to insignificance.” Having things is not the issue. It whether or not things have us! Material wealth and possessions can certainly lend pleasure, comfort, and interest to our lives. There is no virtue or pleasure whatever in destitution. However, rich or poor, the hole in our souls cannot be filled with full barns, big portfolios, large parishes, or shopping sprees. Let me say again, these things are not bad in themselves; they just are not the key to spiritual peace and wholeness.

What will give us this profound inner peace? The answer is: nothing. That is correct - nothing can give you peace in your deepest self. Listen to the word: no-thing can give you peace. The hole in our soul cannot be filled with any thing. It is a bottomless, limitless hole. It is an eternal space, and it can only be filled with the Eternal. In this moment –not this week, or this year, or today – but at this moment, sitting right here, now, answer this question: what do I need or want... I suggest that the immediate answer for most of you is, “Nothing.” No-thing. Allowed a few moments to think about it, things would filter into your thoughts; you might be bombarded with needs and wants. Jesus is teaching us in the incident and in the parable in today’s lesson: no thing can make you happy, in the sense of deep inner oneness with life. If you are in material distress, I hope and pray that your needs will be met. If you have more than you need, I hope and pray you will find generous ways to use what you have for the greater good. But as for that deep peace, wholeness an being at one within yourself, with God and with others, surrender yourself to the Eternal, the eternal riches of God. The Eternal arrives when no-thing stands between us and the eternal. In the next silent moments, pray this paraphrase of St. Augustine’s prayer: “Let my restless heart find its rest in you, O God.”

(Next week, in *The Eternal Arrives: Part II*, we will look at Jesus’ teaching about the second great barrier to union with God – time.)

- The Rev’d Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: “We cannot escape from our daily routine, because it will go with us wherever we go... Everyday life must become itself our prayer.” - Karl Rahner

SERMON

Pentecost IX – 7/25/10 – Luke 11:1-13

“The Other Lord’s Prayer”

Luke’s account of “The Journey to Jerusalem” continues as the backdrop for the instruction of Jesus’ disciples. Today it is on prayer. Apparently in some kind of competition with the disciples of John the Baptist, the disciples asked, “Teach us how to pray the way John does for his disciples.” So Jesus said (free-translation) “OK. Here is a prayer: ‘We seek you above all else, O God; keep us living in and being as generous toward others as we wish for ourselves. May we not be distracted from the good.’” I haven’t been able to discover where or when it got the English title, “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is possible that is what the 1549 Book of Common Prayer called it. The more common name would be the Pater Noster, Latin for “Our Father,” although the Latin reference, *oratio dominica* was around for some time.”

The Lord’s Prayer belongs to the tradition of verbal or vocal prayer. Verbal prayer, sung or said in the liturgy, brings us together and reshapes us as the community of faith. It gathers us and restores our focus as the living embodiment of Christ in the world. After being pulled in many directions during the previous week, we begin the first day of the week by restoring our community vision of the life in Christ.

Verbal prayers of petition for our own needs and intercession for others are the means by which we offer up to God ourselves and others and the circumstances in our lives. Praying for others in specific words unleashes powerful forces of support. Because others are praying for us, we are assured that whatever the outcomes of our circumstances, the presence of God will always be with us. Jesus, as usual, is our example. He prayed that he wouldn’t have to die, but he died in the consolation of dying into God. “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.” Words are powerful.

Today, however, I want to focus on what I call the Other Lord’s Prayer. What I am referring to is not a particular prayer, but a practice of prayer that only in the past 40 years has begun to reappear in any substantial way in Western Christian spiritual tradition. Here are some Gospel settings of Jesus and the other kind of prayer:

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. Matt. 14:23

After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. Mark 6:46

But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. Luke 5:16

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. Luke 6:12

Let me suggest that Jesus did not spend hours and hours saying prayer words. Think about it. How long can we manage verbal prayers? I'll bet the Prayers of the People feel long sometimes. Most of us do not have long periods of verbal prayer. As someone said, there are only two verbal prayers – “thanks,” and “help.” Prayer without words has a different purpose from vocalized prayers. This other kind of Lord's prayer seeks only to come to rest in God, to be in com-union with God, to become one with God. It sounds like some kind of advanced spiritual gymnastics, but let me assure you that it is a very old and common form of prayer and was practiced by Jesus. Matthew (6:6-7) records Jesus' teaching about it, which translated, reads something like this, “Whenever you pray, go into your inner room and pray to your Father in secret ... and don't heap up words like foreigners do who think they will be heard by their many words.” The King James Version says, “Go into your closet...” The houses Jesus and his contemporaries lived in had neither secret rooms nor closets. What do you suppose he was talking about? He means to go into the secret recesses of your being and there enter into communion with the Eternal Mystery of God. Meet God in friendship and love. Sit with God. Just be with God.

Call it what you will: meditation, contemplation, communion, listening. It is different kind of prayer from word prayers. It is, simply put, being with God. Long relegated to the monastic life, it sadly fell out of the spiritual practice of people living out their daily lives. As you have heard me say, I believe that the spiritual life is essentially simple, and that includes contemplative prayer.

Here is how:

1. Find 20 minutes and a place where you will likely not be disturbed.
2. Sit comfortably erect
3. Choose a sacred word – any word you associate with your faith, love, peace, faith, Jesus, grace, the intrinsic meaning of the word is not what counts. This will be your word of consent to be with God.
4. Close your eyes, because that eliminates fifty percent of what a sighted person's brain processes. Your mind will then be filled with all kinds of thoughts and distractions as happens when we do any kind of prayer. This is normal and will not go away completely or even often. As soon as you recognize that you are becoming involved with one of these thoughts, internally say your sacred word, lay the word on it, so to speak, and let the thought drift away. If you spend the whole 20 minutes saying your sacred word, you have at the least spent 20 minutes consenting to sit in friendship and love with God – no strings, no needs, no purposes, no desires, just willing to be with God. That is a good thing.

This sermon will be available online and in printed form this week, if you want to review these simple suggestions. This fall, I will be offering a Spiritual Retreat for Men, titled: “CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN EVERYDAY LIFE: Steering from a Rough Sea to a Sheltered Cove.” Never fear, I am also planning a similar retreat for women some time before I leave. At the very least, remember that there is another Lord's Prayer – just being with God.

-The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Pentecost VII – 7/11/10 – Luke 10:25-37

“The Space of Love”

Have you ever wondered if the Good Samaritan parable is a little obvious? What religion, what culture, for that matter, doesn't have some form of neighborliness involved in it – maybe not for outsiders or foreigners, but at least for each other? So it makes one wonder if there is more to this parable than the usual point, that we should treat whoever needs us as a neighbor. There may be a dimension to this story that goes far beyond lending a helping hand into the spiritual depths of the Christian experience. You are an excellent congregation for preaching. Once in a while I like to push the envelope. Your thoughtful response to sermons encourages me to do that, although you may feel at some point that I am taking you way out on a limb. But if you are ready for a spiritual adventure, here we go.

We do have to know some things Jesus' listeners would have inferred from the story and hear with their ears. A man – notice Jesus gave him no ethnic identification and the man was even stripped of identifying clothing - was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a foolish thing to do for precisely what happened to him. A priest and a Levite came by and both did nothing to help the man. Remember, Jesus was telling this story to common village folk whose attitude toward the priests and Levites of the day would be, “Why would you expect anything better from the likes of them?” In stories of this sort, there were always three character groups, in this case the man, the temple officials, and then the third. The listeners, of course, were expecting to hear this introduction: “and then along came one of the compassionate people from a nearby village.” Then, Jesus threw them a curve, and said a Samaritan came along who helped the man – can you imagine? A Samaritan was the despised half-breed. Jesus' listeners couldn't stand this story because it exposed and challenged their worst prejudices and judgments.

This story, however, is far more than a lesson about being a good neighbor. It is about the very nature of the kingdom of God. To live in the Kingdom of God is to live beyond the boundaries of our opinions, prejudices, likes and dislikes, beyond our cultural conditioning, beyond politics, and indeed even beyond our religious boundaries. To take us way into the personal depth of this, it says that the Kingdom of God is beyond all the boundaries of our thoughts and feelings.

I hope that you have been some place in your life at night where you could look up and have your breath taken away by the heavens. I've had that experience in the Canadian north woods and in the Western mountains. Our attention is transfixed on the stars. But by focusing on the stars, what are we missing? Exactly, - we overlook the space in which the stars hang. From our vantage point it looks like there are a lot of stars close together, but that is not true. The space in which the stars exist is far vaster than we can imagine. Our little planet is in the outer reaches of a small galaxy we call the Milky Way. A galaxy is a cluster of stars, dust, and dark matter, which is some kind of material, but you can't see it. Astronomers estimate there are 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe – notice I said observable. Our nearest neighboring galaxy is called the Andromeda galaxy. Suppose we all said, “Let's visit a planet in Andromeda.” First, we have to have a conveyance that travels at the speed of light. How fast is that? You could go from Earth to the moon in one second. That is pretty fast. So, how long will it take us to get from the Milky Way galaxy to the Andromeda galaxy, travelling at the speed of light? You will be traveling for approximately 2.3 million years. So the true marvel is not the stars, but the infinite space in which they exist.

Think of all the things that occupy our attention, and let us say those things are the stars. Now imagine God is space in which the stars hang. That space is the thing, not the stars. In the simplest possible terms, Jesus came to take us beyond the stars of our lives into the space of God. In order to do that, we make a simple but profound shift from the stars to the space around them. We move our attention past all the thoughts, ideas, beliefs, concepts, impressions and judgments that act as barriers between God and ourselves and between ourselves and others. We tend to take everything we think and feel with such utter seriousness. In Jesus' parable, the Samaritan is an example of someone who lives beyond these thoughts and feelings. Remember, the Samaritans weren't any happier about the Judeans than the Judeans were about Samaritans. But this man lived in the God-space, not just in the stars of thoughts and feelings. He did not see a man in the ditch, but the God in him saw the God in the injured one, and since God is love, love happened. The space of love grew around and within them.

So how do we get space around the thoughts and feelings that plague us - that constant babble, discussing, judging, wandering, categorizing, and worry? It is a simple thing. Move your attention from the stars to space. Let space grow and broaden around the things that weigh you down and sap your energy. Lose the thoughts and feelings and circumstances of your life to the loving space of God. When they come back, notice them, “Oh, yes, there is that old thought that has plagued me for ten years. Today I will surrender it – turn it over – let space grow around it. “I surrender my distracting thoughts and negative feelings to the infinite love of God.” Once may not be enough; you may have to do it ten times, or twenty, or thirty times a day.

But, don't wait another day or even another moment. The stars are not it. It's the space. Begin to live in the space of love, the God space.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: Ingratitude leaves us in a state of deprivation where we are

always looking for something else.
- Alexander Green, *The Secret of Shelter Island*, p. 167.

SERMON
Pentecost VI– 7/4/10 – Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
“Jerusalem of the Heart”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus continues on his way to Jerusalem. He sent out 70 disciples in pairs to preach in the countryside. Their instructions were to cure the sick, and preach, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

In his book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg writes about two processions arriving at Jerusalem at the same time, setting off the events that the Christian Church calls Holy Week. As you may know, old Jerusalem was and is a walled city with various gates of entry. Borg contrasts the arrival of Jesus with that of Pontius Pilate. Pilate would have spent as little time as possible in Jerusalem. He lived in the Imperial compound at Caesarea by the Sea on the beautiful Mediterranean shore. However, it was time for the biggest religious observance of the country called Passover. In Jerusalem, and the numbers of people there would swell dramatically. The Fifth Roman Prefect of Judea could not take any chances on an uprising among the riff-raff and rabble of Jerusalem.

So Pilate had to rouse himself from his seaside residence and lead a garrison of troops into the city to protect the Peace of Rome. There begins the study in contrasts. Think of those Roman soldiers. With them, Rome ruled the known world. Listen to the rhythmic beat of their feet on the road, the creak of leather and the jangle of their armor. Watch the sun glint off the tack of the officers’ horses, great beasts of warfare, snorting and stamping, as they entered the city gate.

Now, go to a gate on the opposite side of the city. Here comes a troop of country folk, on their way to celebrate Passover at the Temple. At the center of this crowd is a man on a donkey. In spite of what even his disciples may have thought, notice his message was not, “Follow me and defy Rome! Join the uprising.” The message was, “The kingdom of God has come near you.”

Today is the Fourth of July, the civic celebration of the founding of the United States of America, the commemoration of the Declaration of Independence of the Colonies from the Kingdom of Great Britain. There has been debate since the earliest days of the forming of our country about the relationship of church and state. The whole issue of church and state has been an abiding concern of mine for most of my adult life. The problem, as I see it is not so much that of separation of church and state as it is the confusion of church and state. I believe Jesus’ march on Jerusalem was indeed a challenge to the Roman power, but there is no confusion or melding of the two. Entering Jerusalem on the other side of the city was a challenge of the heart, a revolution of spirit, not of arms, power and politics. The question is this: does separation of church and state protect religion from the state or the state from religion, or both?

There is something that is a great concern to me, ever since September 11, 2001. We have come to associate the terrorist groups and countries who support them with Islam. Every demagogue in history knows the power of uniting religious fervor with political goals. I think those who cynically manipulate today’s terrorist groups from behind the scenes are perfect examples of this unholy amalgam. I have noticed, as you may have, it is always someone other than the leaders of these groups who blow themselves up for Allah and the promise of Paradise. Those who would cynically misuse the Koran as justification for their evil are no different from those who have used the Bible to justify all manner of ghastly behavior.

There is a fundamentalist spirit that infects every religion at one time or another and does not represent the best and broadest practice of that religion. Personally, I have no more desire to live in a fundamentalist Christian country than I would want to live in a fundamentalist Islamic country. Whenever the state and religion coalesce, I believe it is disastrous. Because that is so, this is my plea to you this day, on July 4, 2010. I beg you, do not to support anything that makes the struggle between the West and the radical groups and countries in the Middle East into a religious conflict. Please, let us have no more religious crusades. It may seem like a simplistic question to ask, but I will ask it anyway: Is it possible to imagine Jesus leading a holy war? There is no such thing as a religious war, only a war fought using religious principles to

justify it.

Sadly, it is necessary from time to time for the state to defend our country and combat terrorism with force. That is the point – it is a state function. Our government must do everything within its power to protect the citizens. That is a primary function of any state. Providing the context in which a country’s citizens may pursue their religious practice in peace and without interference has been a value in this country since the beginning. If this country decided to meld church and state, church, would it be a version of the Christian faith? Take 17th Century England’s Oliver Cromwell. After Catholic leaning King Charles was beheaded, Cromwell headed up the Protestant Commonwealth and divided the country in civil war. A church like this, of course, would have had to dismantle and throw out its altar, get rid of the art, have its communion vessels stolen and poke out the stained glass windows. As I said, it all depends on whose version of Christianity we may want to become one with the government. Of course, the political debate about what provides the best context in which citizens and their religion may thrive has always been a matter of intense debate.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and preached the kingdom of God has arrived. That kingdom is not a state or a government. Jesus’ challenge to Rome was the very fact that the Roman state and religion were one in the same, and Jesus is saying they are very different. Caesar, one of whose titles, by the way, was Son of God, has every right to have his likeness imprinted on coins, but not on the hearts of the people. The kingdom Jesus brought is of the spirit. He will always be a challenge to governments, but His Jerusalem is of the heart. As Christians, may our only crusade be to pray and work diligently for peace, for an end to violence, oppression and war in the world, and to bring into a dark world the light of the kingdom of God.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: When life caves in, you do not need reasons – you need comfort. You do not need some answers – you need someone. And Jesus does not come to us with an explanation – He comes to us with his presence. – Robert Benson

SERMON

Pentecost V– 6/27/10 – Luke 9:51-62

“Set Your Face”

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” To set one’s face is a phrase that means to follow a decision with determination and persistence. Essentially this is applicable for many things in our lives, the primary one being our commitment to set our face toward God, the Eternal, whom we have experienced through Jesus Christ. So many distractions can divert our attention from this elemental commitment of our lives. Jesus is our example of setting one’s face toward the goal.

During ten years of my practice as a family therapist, I worked with people suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction, and their families who suffered along with them and because of them. During those years, my colleagues and I were helpful to many people, celebrities to street addicts, in their quest for recovery. However, both in inpatient and in private outpatient treatment clinics, in addition to the services we therapists provided, no one, even the celebrity, could be in treatment with us who were not also regularly attending a Twelve Step Program such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Alanon for family members, and other variations on the theme.

Those of you who are friends of Bill W. will be very familiar with the things I will say today. Bill Wilson was the guiding light in the 1930’s behind AA and the Twelve Step program. He was declared hopelessly alcoholic after having every form of treatment known at the time. He had a spiritual awakening, stopped drinking and dedicated his life to others caught in the same deadly disease. He was convinced that recovery from an addiction is a spiritual program and requires a daily commitment that begins on arising. So do all of us who are recovering from life. It requires an understanding of living in the now. This is the only day one has to live; this is the only day in which one may practice recovery. This sounds very much like conversion in the Christian life to me - a lifelong, daily commitment to setting our face toward God. Each day we begin again. The faith of yesterday is useless today; the hope of tomorrow has not yet come. Today is the day in which we set our

face toward God.

Fr. Thomas Keating, of Centering Prayer fame, has written that the Twelve Step Program is the greatest American spiritual contribution of the 20th Century. Listen to the first three Steps:

1. We admitted we were powerless ... that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him. That sounds to me like conversion. It sounds to me like setting our face toward God. It is often said that the Twelve Steps are the description of how to lead a normal, healthy life. Not everybody is recovering from addiction, but everybody is a recovering human being. We are recovering from life by the grace of God. Granted, if you never have worries, cares, losses, fears, depressions, loneliness and emptiness in your life, then you don't need to pay attention.

The Christian roots of Anglican/Episcopal tradition are deeply embedded in Twelve Steps of AA. Bill Wilson said that Fr. Sam Shoemaker, Rector of Calvary Church in New York, was the spiritual guide behind the development of the Twelve Step Program. He declared Fr. Shoemaker to be a Co-founder of AA. Some of you are in AA. Some of you need to be. However, I am using the Twelve Step program as a pointer to a larger truth. We are all recovering from life. And that recovery requires that we set our faces toward Jerusalem. That Jerusalem is keeping God at the center of our lives. For someone with an addiction, stopping using or drinking is not recovering. Like spiritual conversion, there may be a point in time when realization hit, but conversion, recovery, becomes a life-long journey. For everyone, after a spiritual awakening, we need to stay awake.

Spiritually speaking, I am not talking about salvation and our destination after death. Jesus settled that one over 2000 years ago. I am talking about whether or not daily life is heaven or hell. I'm not dead yet – how can I live my life to the fullest potential of my humanity? I no longer want to wait for heaven to overtake me. I want to live life now. That's the recovering human piece. If Jesus showed us God, then I set my face toward God. Eternal life begins here and now. It is not something I do occasionally. It is so easy to forget, to deny that there is a void in life. It is easy to deny and forget - or indeed never know - that life can be hell without God. Every day the anxieties of life press in upon us. Every day we are reminded of losses and subtractions. Every day there are occasions for depression and loneliness. You may look around at friends who appear to have no religious practice and no spiritual connection in their lives, and yet they seem perfectly happy, going along through life. Let me tell you three things about that: first, we don't know what is keeping them awake, sweating, at 3 o'clock in the morning. People are capable of putting on the great fronts, like the facades in a movie set – they look perfect out front, but there may be nothing but emptiness or darkness behind those fronts. The second thing is that it is possible to numb ourselves against the realities of life. Some people use alcohol, drugs, sex, and food. Others use possessions and diversions; others use work and achievement. There are many ways of denying the internal emptiness. Third, human beings are capable of massive denial about all sorts of things, including and especially the condition of their souls.

But if we are going to recover, we need daily to set our face toward God, and return time and time again throughout the day. I have known people whose lives are devastated by illness and disaster, yet in spirit they are awake and alive. Living in what appears to be hell, they were heavenly. On the other hand, I have known people who appeared to have heaven on earth and their lives were a living hell. The difference, in one form or another, is this: people awakened to life admitted powerlessness on their own to manage life; they came to believe that a power greater than themselves could restore sanity to life, and then they made a decision to turn wills and their lives over to the care of God...the first three steps in the daily and lifelong journey back to life, back to God.

Set your face toward life.

The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: Do not want things to turn our as they seem best to you but as God pleases. Then you will be free of confusion and thankful in prayer. Abba Nilus, 4th Century Desert Father.

SERMON
Pentecost II – 6/6/10 – Luke 7:11-17
“The Only Choice Is Love”

Nain is a village about 5 ½ miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up and not far from Capernaum where he lived as an adult. As you can imagine, not much went on in Nain, so when the wonder-working rabbi from Capernaum came through, just about everybody turned out. In the midst of the hubbub, people were talking, laughing, asking Jesus questions, a situation when anyone would have been pretty distracted. Yet one gets the impression that out of the corner of his eye, Jesus saw a little funeral procession going the other way. Luke says that Jesus saw a widow accompanying the body of her son. Since Jesus would have known the village, we wonder if he recognized the woman and grasped what had happened.

We read that Jesus “had compassion for her.” This is a very mild translation nowhere close to the full impact of the Greek word. The root meaning of the word could read more like this: “When Jesus saw her, it was like being kicked in the stomach.” Not only did Jesus grieve with her, but he feared for her. This situation went well beyond the grief of losing her son; she was losing everything. Remember the social context. As a woman alone, she had no opportunities or means to support herself. Prostitution was one of the few viable options. Those were hard days. This was a disaster piled on a tragedy.

As compelling as the gospel stories may be in themselves, the writers did not just collect anecdotes about Jesus. Incidents were chosen to illustrate some larger message. This story is a parting of the veil whereby we get a glimpse of the very nature of the Eternal in the midst of human experience. We discover once again, that the nature of the Creator of the universe is love and compassion, deep, soul-wrenching compassion. Immediately, there may come a thought that if God is so compassionate, how come so many bad things happen in this world? It is true that this world can be a difficult and dangerous place, fraught with people and events that can create great evil and damage and a place of accidents and illness. This issue is not so much what God should do about it, but how shall we be in this world. Will we be the lights of love and compassion in the world to counter the world’s darkness?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong writes a weekly blog called, “A New Christianity for a New World.” In one of the recent issues, Bishop Spong tells of good friends who lost their second adult daughter in an accident. Bishop Spong writes: “When I got the telephone call, it was like absorbing a blow to the chest that left my heart pounding and my body breathless, ‘Can you come right away. Lauren has been killed.’ The voice had an urgency that did not allow for further questions. Christine and I went at once.”

Then Spong goes on to talk about how one faces such crippling experiences of life. He writes, “If God is experienced as the source of love, then the only way I can worship God is by loving wastefully, and the more wastefully I love, the more I make God visible... the only way I can worship God is to have the courage to be all that I can be... I am forced to acknowledge that living is not about the quantity of days, but about the quality of life... who among us would sacrifice our most precious life-giving relationships to avoid the inevitable pain of losing that relationship... Is it not in loving another and in giving ourselves to another that the essence of living and the joy of meaning are found? It is not easy to be human, but does not the joy outweigh the pain? So we have to choose. I choose life and love... it is in sharing life, love and being with others that I begin to recognize that I am part of who God is and God is part of who I am, and that all of us are part of those we love and they are part of us. That is now for me the place where God becomes visible and again, for me, that is where eternal life begins.”

When Prof. Dom Crossan was here recently for the Smaltz Lectures, he expressed his personal concern about the historical escalation of the possibilities of violence. It was not good when the first cave man slugged a neighbor with a club, but it would be difficult to destroy the planet with clubs. It would be difficult to destroy the world with bows and arrows and crossbows. Not even the bullets and the bombs of WWII D-Day, 66 years ago today, could have destroyed the planet, although they left the invasion beaches strewn with bodies. But later in that same war, the nuclear potential was finally unleashed to devastate Earth.

To some, there appears today to be a spiritual awakening taking place throughout the world – notice I said spiritual

but not necessarily religious, but that is a topic for another day. Echoing Prof. Crossan's concern, will it come in time? It is not enough to pray for peace and love to come into the world. We have to become these things in the world, to be the soul-wrenching compassion in the world. As I have said before, we must become Jesus in the world. Without that, all prayers for goodness, wholeness, love and peace are worthless. As the St. Francis prayer says, "Make me an instrument of your peace..."

The only choice is love.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering thought: No life can be too busy to close the door on chaos regularly; twenty minutes a day, two hours a week, a morning a month.

- Sister Joan Chittister

SERMON

Pentecost – 5/23/10 – Acts 2:1-21

“No East or West”

The priesthood is an unexpected blessing in my life. One of the biggest adjustments as a former Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church is the length of time allotted to preaching. When I was in the Presbyterian Church, I could have been roundly criticized for preaching as briefly as I have learned to do in the Episcopal Church. However, today I have had to exert little effort in that regard. Indeed, I welcome the opportunity to say that the reading of the Pentecost text from the Book of Acts is a simple message, and it can be – indeed should be - stated in simple brief terms. It is this: the Gospel of Jesus Christ is universal and inclusive of all human diversity. Everybody heard the message that day. Nobody was left out. Everybody was invited to the divine party. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is universal and inclusive of all human diversity.

This means that the Church of Jesus Christ will, in its totality, speak to and receive all the diversity of humankind. Individual churches are often not diverse although they like to think of themselves as such. When Pam and I were at Holy Sacrament Church, there were many Sundays when, among the hundreds attending worship, we were part of a handful of people who were not of Caribbean heritage. In the process of developing their profile for the rector search, there was quite a discussion as to whether or not they should call themselves a diverse parish. Some members considered the parish to be diverse, but that meant that there were several Caribbean countries represented. However, others held that in most other ways, they were not diverse.

I have heard people refer to Bethesda as a diverse parish. If that means there is a wide variety of personalities, political preferences, sizes, shapes, and ages, then Bethesda may have some diversity, although most parishes are like that. Actually, we are very much alike

But then, all of this doesn't really matter. The message of the second chapter of Acts is this: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is universal and inclusive of all human diversity. And the whole church, the universal church, by its very founding on the first celebration of Pentecost will reflect a universal love, respect, and inclusive diversity for the whole human family. Listen to this part of Peter's sermon, which is a quote from the Old Testament prophet Joel's vision of God:

“Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit... then everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” If Peter, quoting Joel, says that even slaves are in, that is the same as declaring that there is no one – ever – who is excluded from the grace of God, or from the church who proposes to represent that God.

In Christ there is no East or West,

In him no South or North;

But one great fellowship of love

Throughout the whole wide earth.

Centering Thought: “The deeper [our] experience of God’s mercy, the more compassion we will have for others.”

Thomas Keating, Invitation to Love.

SERMON

Easter VII– 5/16/10 – Acts 16:16-34

“Good Question”

When I was a kid, my grandmother gave me a quarter every Saturday – ten cents for a comic book and fifteen cents to go to the movie matinee. The most exciting theater attraction was the Serial movies. Those of a certain age will remember that the serials stretched over as many as 16 weeks, each segment lasting about 15 minutes. The end of each installment would have the hero dangling from a cliff or tied to an anchor below water, about to be run over by a train or whatever. It was one hair-raising adventure after another. One of the most famous serials was titled, “The Perils of Pauline.”

No disrespect intended, but the stories of the Apostle Paul’s mission adventures read a little like those old serials – The Perils of Paul. Today, Paul is in prison in Philippi, with his feet fastened to the wall by cuffs and chains. Philippi is still an active seismic area. There was an earthquake, and their chains were shaken loose from the walls. The jailer thought that prisoners may have escaped and prepared to commit suicide which apparently was preferable to what his superiors would have done to him. If you read Chapter 12 of Acts, you will find that when Peter escaped from one of King Herod’s prison, they were killed. In today’s situation, Paul stopped the guard from harming himself. However, the man could still be in trouble, in spite of the fact that he had nothing to do with the earthquake. So, the man then said, “What must I do to be saved?” He was wondering how he was going to explain all of this – how was he going to get out of inevitable trouble? He got an answer to a different question. Paul replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved...” It wasn’t the answer the jailer was expecting, but it is, I think you will agree, a good question.

What must I do to be saved? Does it mean we have to have all the answers? Do we have to be free of doubt? Do we have to live a perfect life? No, to all three of these questions. I am going to suggest two replies to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” The first answer is – nothing. The message of the Bible is that God’s great act of redemption through Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection restores and transforms us to life as God intended. Jesus Christ is the solution to the human condition. God is the author of salvation, the beginning and the end. So the first answer to the question, what must I do to be saved, is nothing. It’s done - accomplished two thousand years ago. Jesus is the threshold to Eternity.

The second answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” is everything. Everything is another word for “conversion.” This is such a misunderstood word in the life of the church. Many Episcopalians shrink from the image of the Bible-pounding preacher who demands that people “come forward and get saved.” Indeed, many people have experienced a dramatic awakening moment. St. Paul was one such person, travelling the road to Damascus to persecute the followers of Jesus, he was fell off his horse, blinded – literally, for a time – in a spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ.

For other people, there is a gradual, over a period of time realization that there is more to life, and the “more” may be found in Jesus Christ. Neither of these things is conversion. Dramatic moment or slow realization, these are just the beginnings of conversion.

Conversion is a lifelong process of conforming to the image of Christ. Everything in our lives is being made new.

Some of you may have heard or noticed that I refer to St. Benedict, Benedictine spirituality, or the Benedictine rule of life. I am a Confrater of a Benedictine monastery in Michigan. A Confrater is an associate. One does not have to become a monk to live out the tradition of the Benedictine rule of life. There are tens of thousands more of us non-monastic

Benedictines than there are monks. One of the key points of Benedictine spirituality is conversion. Conversion is a life-long process. It may begin as a dramatic moment of realization, or the gradual dawning, but once Jesus Christ begins to hold in our lives, conversion has begun.

I like to say conversion begins every morning with the alarm clock and the first prayer of the day – yes, even if the prayer is, “O God.” Conversion is a daily process. Paul didn’t immediately become a missionary. It was a couple of years – some scholars say many – between the Damascus road experience and the commencement of Paul’s ministry. It doesn’t matter, but conversion is a process that is lifelong, ongoing, daily.

We regularly use the GPS – Global Positioning Systems to navigate in our cars. We could hardly manage interim ministry without them. That does not mean I always follow what “she,” the English woman inside the GPS, tells me. When I haven’t paid close attention and wander off the route, or if I willfully decide to ignore her thinking that I know a better way, the GSP voice says, “Recalculating, recalculating.” That is a little like conversion. It is the daily recalculating of our lives. It is constructing and re-constructing, centering and recentering our lives. Life is a biography, not an event. God calls us to write our lives daily after the image of Christ.

What must I do to be saved? It’s a good question. The answer? Nothing but the grace of God – then, everything in our lives opens to the conversion to the spirit of Christ within us.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Easter VI – 5/9/10 – John 14:23-29

“Peace Inside Out”

“I haven’t had a moment’s peace.” Have you ever thought or said that? It is an interesting notion that we measure peace in moments. Few of us would ever say, “I haven’t had a year’s peace,” because it would be impossible to imagine. In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” I wonder what Jesus was talking about? We are in Easter mode, but this verse goes back in time when Jesus was preparing his friends for his impending death in Jerusalem. The crucifixion would be the most disturbing, un-peaceful time of their lives, and yet Jesus was offering them, as his last will and testament, the gift of peace.

It appears that Jesus is not talking about geo-political peace, but an inner peace, a deep, abiding internal state of spirit, that no matter what rages about us in the world and in our lives, we are fundamentally at peace. The metaphor that continues to come to my mind, when I ponder this peace, is the ocean. On the surface there can be the perfect storm taking place, but below that tumultuous surface is the calm of the deep. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” And yet, how easily we can be troubled. I am not speaking just of the tsunamis, the huge burdens or blows of life, but there are a myriad of petty things, plenty of whitecaps, that can rile the surface of our lives.

Today I am going to speak in very practical terms about becoming more peaceful in our lives, the peace that St. Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians, “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding...” (Phil. 4:7) One of the biggest obstacles to that peace in our lives is that we believe and give weight to everything we think. Our minds are a whirring maelstrom of thoughts. You know what I mean. Just sit for a moment and close your eyes to pray, and what happens? A hundred thoughts rush in. Some of the minds here are thinking about something other than the sermon, and that’s OK because it illustrates my point. What if I said I have a new electronic black box that tunes into all the thoughts of everyone in this church and then broadcasts them simultaneously over the public address system? How many want me to push the button? Even if some of you dared me to, I wouldn’t want to do it for myself. It would be the Tower of Babel.

Among people who study these sorts of things, estimates vary, but apparently we have somewhere in the range of 50 – 70 thousand thoughts a day. It is unsettling to hear that 60% of those thoughts are negative about oneself, others, or life generally. But here is an even more startling piece: over 90% of our thoughts are compulsive and repetitive. So it is all old stuff, a lot of it is negative, and it feels like we can’t help it. Is it any wonder that we would say, “If I only had a moment’s

peace...” With all that racket going on in our heads, and the credence and attention we give it, we would indeed welcome a moment’s peace. In one of his books on contemplative prayer, Fr. Thomas Keating has a quote, “No thought is worth thinking about.” These repetitive, compulsive, negative thoughts that roll around in our minds are not worth thinking about. Of course, we have to think, but by that kind of “thinking,” I mean thinking of it as a tool that we use when we need to, not an invisible prison for the mind. Think about how much life we miss when our attention is captive to this mental jumble. Jesus led his life in the peace which passes all understanding. Yes, the Gospels record times when Jesus was disturbed, but he always seemed to return to that place of peace, that deep inner reservoir at the center of our being. That is why Jesus is so compelling throughout the ages.

Here are some simple ways that we can immediately use to move past our repetitive and distracting thoughts. The first thing is to notice these thoughts, acknowledge them and then dismiss them. Say out loud if you are able, internally if not, “There you are, again - Leave.” Another thing you may do is simple physical movement. Get up and walk across the room. Stretch. Sit up straight. Take deep breaths and exhale a prayer like, “Thank you, Lord.” A third thing is to allow the natural world to come to your aid. I think this in one of the ways Jesus stayed grounded in peace. He noticed the lilies of the fields and birds of the air. Look at trees. Look at the plant on your desk and marvel at the intricacy of the leaves or blooms. Feel the leaves. Smell flowers. Briefly run water through your fingers. Pet your pet. The natural world can take us out of our minds and into the peaceful depths of our hearts. This is Rogation Sunday. The Latin word, *rogare*, means to ask or to beseech. It has come to mean beseeching God’s blessing on the natural world – that is why the Rogation Sunday tour of the Bethesda Gardens takes place. If you can’t do the tour, walk the gardens by yourself. Then, become mindful of what you see there – an ant, the fish, a leaf - and you may find that you have slipped into peace, or that peace has slipped into you, and you, if even for a moment, will be free of thought – a glorious moment of peace.

Peace, Jesus’ peace, has little to do with the conditions of our lives or the world. It isn’t what we think, or what we have, or what we lack. Peace is the space where we meet God at the core of our being.

Stop thinking.

Start noticing.

Be peaceful.

–The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Centering Thought: When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds, and diamonds are made under pressure. – Peter Marshall

SERMON

Easter IV – John 10:22-30 April 25, 2010

“Snatch-proof”

If we are serious about God, the biggest spiritual question we face is this: are we prepared to live with mystery? Mystery means something that I know, feel, or experience, but I have no adequate way of explaining or describing. It goes beyond the ability of my mind, my language, and my reason. That does not mean we can’t or shouldn’t talk about God, think about God, write and discuss theology – the study of God. Theology is one of my favorite pastimes, but even the Queen of Sciences, as theology has been called, has a ceiling on which we bump our heads regularly. However, ultimately we are only able to say what we think God is like, to tell stories that illustrate things about God. We can give approximate visions of God. Human beings crave certainty. However, as soon as someone says that they have all the truth about God, and that I must accept their propositions and concepts as the whole truth, I balk. Words and images about God will never be more than pointers.

During my therapy career, I once had a very talkative client who was trying to figure out how to disconnect from her alcoholic father. When I would appear in the waiting room to greet her she would begin telling the latest chapter of the story, continued it through the hall to my office. When I would stop her and ask what she would like to focus on, she would say, “I don’t know... I can’t explain it.”

We must be prepared to live with mystery. I concur with St. Augustine of Hippo, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Many try to ignore that restlessness. I believe that it is part of the human DNA, so to speak, to desire to be in tune with that which transcends our existence. There are brain researchers today who are saying that our brains are hardwired for spirituality. Yet, our minds cannot fully comprehend nor will our language ever be able to articulate the fullness of God. I know God is, but God is also mystery. That is the burden of human spirituality and the challenge of faith. I don't know... I can't explain it.

Let me come now to our focal text for today: Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." On the surface, it sounds as if the faithful are under special protection. In my most candid moments, I have to say that may be a hard proposition to sell. The 19th Century was the century of progress. French psychologist Emil Coue enunciated his school of psychology, which was the frequent repetition of the mantra, "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better." People generally had the same view of the world – things were getting better and better. Then the 20th Century happened, with WWI, WWII including the Holocaust and the atom bomb, then the Soviet gulags, the Cultural revolution in China, Korea, Viet Nam, 911, Iraq, Afghanistan, and skirmishes in between. You may have travelled in Europe and saw the magnificent but empty Cathedrals and asked, "Why empty?" Some have observed that Europe asked where God was in all that happened to them in the 20th Century, and they did not get a good answer. The answer is cloaked in mystery.

I can go from the world scene to many if not most people here today. Things have happened in your life, to loved ones, to friends, that have raised the question, where was God?

A single sermon, or all the sermons in the world, will not satisfactorily answer this question; it is ultimately part of the great mystery of the spiritual life. Let me leave you with some things to contemplate. Fifty thousand years ago, homo sapiens, our version of human beings, was emerging in the grand scheme of things. Fifty thousand years from now we will seem as strange and distant to those people as our early version seems to us, assuming we do not destroy ourselves and the planet. In other words, the world, humanity, is a work in progress. This world in which we live is a beautiful, wondrous place, but it is also still fraught with difficulty, suffering and danger.

Many of the important questions of life are mystery, and God will always be mystery. However, something – rather some one - came on the scene two thousand years ago - not a creed, not a theological proposition, not a hypothesis, but a person. His name is Jesus. He is God's ultimate message to humanity. And the message is this: no matter what happens, nothing can snatch you from Eternal Love. You may not be illness-proof, you may not be trouble-proof, you may not be sadness-proof, you are surely not age-proof, but you are snatch-proof. "...it is [God] who ultimately stands behind the preservation of Jesus' sheep.... As Paul would say to the Colossian believers, 'your life is now hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). There can be no greater security."

I can't explain it. It is a mystery, but I know it is true.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

Make a gift of your life and lift all mankind by being kind, considerate, forgiving, and compassionate at all times, in all places, and under all conditions, with everyone as well as yourself. This is the greatest gift anyone can give.

-David R. Hawkins, Spiritual writer.

SERMON

Easter III - 04/18/10 - John 21:1-19

"Monday Mystics"

The gospel lesson today is the epilogue, the Afterword of John's Gospel. The mysteries of the crucifixion and resurrection are left behind in Jerusalem. The setting now is Galilee. Seven of the disciples are gathered. There is Simon Peter, flawed, denied Jesus, but begins to show here the change that is taking place among them after their Jerusalem experience. Thomas the Confessor is there - having seen Jesus' wounds, he is the first to make a post-resurrection confession of faith. Nathanael the skeptic who sarcastically asked if anything good could come out of Nazareth, but when he met Jesus said, "You are the Son of God." Then there were the sons of Zebedee, mentioned here for the first and only time by John, plus two others. Peter said, "I'm going fishing." This does not mean, "Let's go and see if bass are biting." He meant, "I don't know about the

rest of you, but I am going back to work.” It was a Monday morning kind of atmosphere.

The Diocesan School for Christian Studies offers a two-semester course called, “Spiritual Journey.” The class is open to anyone, but it is required for all people who may be discerning a vocation for Holy Orders. I have taught the course for the past several years and will teach the first semester again this fall. In it we explore the whole notion of spirituality, what it means, and how to articulate one’s spirituality to oneself and others. The second semester focuses on what many consider to be a strange and exotic group of people called “mystics.” The very first session participants are asked to discuss their understandings and impressions of mystics. Some of their ideas are: a recluse living in a cave in Qumran by the Dead Sea, a monk or nun, a super-religious person, a solitary religious thinker whose writings are understood by practically no one. Then we look at some of the classic characteristics of those who have been traditionally identified as mystics. Not all mystics have all the characteristics, and may in fact be someone who is a seeker of these things more than an example.

One characteristic of a mystic is someone who looks for God in all things, experiences, and circumstances. Be it good, bad or indifferent, God is. A second characteristic is seeking truth beyond the material and senses. A mystic seeks the transcendent, a word whose roots mean “step across;” asking the question, “Is this all there is, or is there more?” A third attribute of a mystic is wanting to be free from the regrets of the past and the anxieties of the future – in other words, someone who seeks to live life in this moment as much as possible. A mystic is someone who desires to be in communion with God, and to be at peace with God, with others, and within oneself.

There are other characteristics of a mystic, I am sure, but I hope by now you have begun to realize what dawns on the students in the Spiritual Journey class, that each of them shows signs of being a mystic. A mystic is not some exotic and rare person, but can be and is anyone who ever asked a question about life. All of you are Monday Mystics – you wouldn’t otherwise be here on Sunday. When one reads the biographies of acknowledged mystics, whatever their achievements, spiritual or otherwise, there is a good deal that is ordinary, regular, Monday morning about them. 19th Century St. Therese, who died of tuberculosis in her 20’s, is listed as one of Doctors of the Roman Church – there are only 33 people on that list. Her greatest desire was to be simply the littlest flower in a corner of the garden.

If you were here, you know what a glorious Easter we experienced. Any of us may have transcended, if only for an instant, the barriers of life, and were drawn into the moment and were at one with God and others. Easter could have well been a mystical experience for any and all of us. Now, like the seven disciples, it is two weeks later, a spiritual Monday morning, so to speak. However momentary, however slight the experience of the Eternal may have been, the Monday after is never quite the same, for we are Monday Mystics, people who have met God, have found God, have been found by God, and thus transformed however greatly or minutely, we march ahead into life.

Holy Spirit give us faith; Holy Spirit give us hope; Holy Spirit give us love; Revive thy works in this land, beginning with me. - Ugandan Prayer

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Holy Week -Wednesday – John 13:21-32

Stunned – that is the only word for those gathered in the room rented for the occasion. These people had been together day and night for a couple of years. And Jesus announces that one of them is going to betray him to his enemies! Who could it possibly be? They even began to wonder out loud if one of them was going to do something perhaps by accident that would create trouble.

Notice, there is no hint that anyone looked askance at Judas. There is nothing in the reading that suggests that he was under any more suspicion than they were themselves. Peter apparently motions, maybe with his chin to the beloved disciple to see if he knows or can find out – you know how we make those silent signals – a lift of the chin, a tilt of the head, a frown thrown in. So he asked Jesus who is was, and then Jesus told him that he would dip a piece of bread into the dish of what? Humus? Wine? Olive oil? This was a classic gesture of fondness to a dinner guest. And then Jesus hands it to the

betrayed. The gospel text indicates no answer on the part of the beloved disciple – which one might take to mean he still couldn't imagine Judas or anyone betraying Jesus. Nor did any of the others catch the implication of Jesus handing Judas the bread.

When we read in the news or hear on TV that some really dreadful thing has happened – we can't believe it. We can't believe that humans are capable of such darkness. Yet the Bible is full of recognizable stories that such is indeed the human condition. Jesus, classic teacher of the times, drew lines in sharp contrast. He said that contemplating something is the same as doing it. One of the Peter letters picked up on this theme and said that rage at someone is on the path to murder. There is darkness in every human heart, whether we can believe it or not, and anyone can embark on a path that could lead to dire consequences.

Jesus calls us back from that path. Back from the darkness toward the light. That is what repentance means. Repentance doesn't mean feeling bad about something – that's regret. Repentance means turning around, pulling back from a path into the darkness of greed, malice, envy and lust and toward the life of love and compassion.

The disciples couldn't imagine that Judas or any one of them could possibly betray Jesus. "It can't possibly be I, is it?" "Tell me it isn't so." Yet, on what we call Easter morning, according to John, only a solitary figure came to the tomb, a disciple Mary from a little town on the west side of Lake Tiberias called Magdala. She was the only one left. All the rest had departed, fled, betrayed even their own dreams.

Jesus calls us, every one of us, back from that path, back from the darkness toward the light. 17th Century Anglican priest and poet, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, once preached these words: "One of the most convenient Hieroglyphicks of God is a Circle; and a Circle is endless; whom God loves, hee loves to the end; and not onely to their own end, to their death, but to his end, and his end is, that he might love them still." Holy Week is the church's special observance of God's love calling us back into the light.

- The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Maundy Thursday – 04.01.10 – John 13:1-15

"Getting Down to Earth"

I invite you to focus on Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples. In particular, we will explore what Jesus is teaching us about humility. The word root of humility comes from humus, or organic earth - dirt. In other words, humility means something as modest and basic as earth. It is not hard to imagine how we got the saying, "She is a down-to-earth kind of person." Let's look at the incident in tonight's Gospel. Ordinarily, a host would offer footwashing to his guests as they arrive. In this case, Jesus waits until the meal has already begun to heighten the importance of this demonstrated teaching. Footwashing was the most menial task of a household. In that time and culture, only Gentile slaves and women were given the task. It was a gracious gesture of hospitality for guests who have walked the dusty Palestinian roads, but the householder or host would never do it himself. Jesus removed his robe, leaving himself clothed only in a loincloth. Then he wrapped himself in a towel, and his appearance became that of a Gentile slave about to provide the service.

Tonight, I offer three quotes to focus our attention on the meaning of humility. These quotes come from a book, *Living in the Truth: Saint Benedict's Teaching on Humility*, by Michael Casey, a monk of the Tarrawarra Abbey in Australia. Here is the first quote: "It is pride which causes us to believe that we are not like others ... that we are exceptions that the ordinary rules do not apply to us." (P. 23)

Whether we admit it or not, somewhere in our psyches there will be a little voice of rebellion when someone or something tells us that we are no different from anybody else. We certainly won't agree to the proposition that our grandchildren are like all other children. They are much too good looking and much too smart to be like all the other children. That's a natural pride that is fine unless we have decided that our grandchildren are exceptional because of their grandparents – "on our side."

Pride stunts and even destroys community and relationships because it refuses to accept the commonality we have with everyone else. Surely we are better, more evolved, more gracious, more whatever than those others. Humility is that place in spiritual maturity that accepts our place as one among the many who are just as we are, human beings. Humility is the recognition that whatever we have, either as natural gifts or acquired skills and status, are gifts, accidents of birth and place. These things do not set us apart from others; they are gifts we have been given for the benefit of all.

The second part of this understanding of humility is the acceptance that we do have gifts and talents. Humility is not a false modesty about our gifts. Humility requires us to lay claim to our gifts, recognize them as gifts and to be used for the common good and not kept for ourselves or for self-admiration. False humility – “I’m proud of my humility” - pretending that we have few or no gifts is as much a violation of true humility as is thinking we are better than anyone else.

The second quotation is this: “[Humility] is not, in essence, a particular attitude in social dealings but a fundamental stance before God: a willingness to be saved, an openness to God’s action, an assent to the mysterious processes by which God’s plan is realized in the hearts of human beings. Humility is not an action, nor a sequence of action, nor a habit formed by the repetition of actions. It is, rather, a receptivity... a matter of being acted upon by God.” (P. 56)

“Willingness,” “openness” and “receptivity,” are the three operative words in that quote. Listen to them again: willingness, openness and receptivity. It is common to say of an excessively proud person, “He can’t be told a thing.” Pride is closed to hearing anything other than one’s own agenda. Stubbornness, by the way, sometimes thought of as a virtue, may simply be closed-minded pride, unwilling to admit any question or challenge to one’s ideas, plans and actions. See how this fits with the first quote. The prideful, stubborn person thinks she is different from others, gifted, entitled in ways that others are not. He does not see himself as one person among other persons with gifts to give and also with gifts to receive from others.

The third quote will largely stand by itself. Humility is: “...that total self-acceptance typical of untarnished humanity. Those who are humble experience no shame. They do not need lies and evasions to inflate their importance in the eyes of their associates, or to buttress their self-esteem. They have overcome the tendency to regard others as competitors or rivals, and so they work with whatever they have, and waste no time envying those who possess different qualities. The humble are equally content with both gifts and the limitations that come from their nature or their personal history. Humility brings with it a fundamental happiness that is able to cope with external difficulties and sorrows.”

Humility is the autobiography of Jesus. The Incarnation is the story of God getting down to earth. Humility is the keystone of Christ’s kingdom. If we would be like Christ, we will begin and end in humility.

~ The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Good Friday Hymn Meditation – 04/02/10
“A Stable Lamp Is Lighted”

Each of us providing a meditation today has chosen a hymn to center our thoughts. Poet Richard Wilbur is 89 years old. Among other things he won both the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award in 1957. He had his first poem published when he was 8. He wrote the lyrics to several songs in Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*. In 1967 Wilbur wrote, “A Stable Lamp Is Lighted,” Number 104 in our Hymnal. Please turn to it now... The music is a lullaby, written in 1983 by David Hurd, Professor of Music and Organist at General Seminary. He named the tune Andujar, after Lily Andujar Rogers the director of the Boys Choir at St. Gabriel’s, Hollis, Long Island, where Hurd sang as a boy.

Let me say a few words of reflection about it. The hymn is listed in the Christmas section of the Hymnal. The truth of the matter is that it could be listed in all of the major sections that have to do with the life and ministry of Jesus. Indeed, I will go so far as to say that a church under persecution or in hiding could have this as a single page hymnal, for it is the entire sweep, the whole panorama of God’s redemptive movement in human history – the Incarnation, the fleeting moment of Triumph, the Passion and the Resurrection – the Gospel in four verses.

In the Passion story read a few moments ago, it said that since it was the day of Preparation for the Passover, the religious

leaders didn't want bodies left on the crosses. Sometimes it took days for someone to die by crucifixion, and they didn't want anything untidy to interfere with or detract from their religious duties. To speed things along, it was the practice to break the legs of those on crosses so they could no longer support themselves from sagging, thus speeding asphyxiation, the main cause of crucifixion death. I have no need to dwell on sensational details, but it is what it is. Those sorts of things tread on the sensibilities of the piously delicate. Jesus was spared because he was already dead, having given over his life on his own.

However, removing the unpleasantness from sight was certainly not the end of it. Nothing was going to erase what happened that day. The ancient prophet, Habakkuk, stands on his watchtower, having being told by God to write the message big enough for someone running by to see God's message. The prophet says that nothing can hold back God's truth. Habakkuk says, "The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork" – indeed even as the stones of this place proclaim the glory of God.

For if no one else spoke up or remembered or carried on the cause, if all forsook him, if everyone dropped by the wayside faithless and silent, then "...every stone shall cry."

~ The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON

Easter Sunrise – 4/4/10 – Matt. 28:1-10

"Dark or Light, He is Risen"

Matthew tells us that it was getting light when Mary from Magdala arrived at Jesus' tomb. If you come back later today, you will hear John say that it was still dark. John is putting to paper the stories told and retold by a second generation of Christians, perhaps sixty or seventy years after the fact. Matthew gathered his collection perhaps thirty or forty years after the Easter morning experience.

Was it still dark or was it already light? Does it matter? I know that Pam's version of our story forty years ago would differ from mine, and indeed from sixty years ago our versions would not only differ, but be sparse in places. Our children's version of 40 years ago I know would differ from ours. I always thought we were had a good time playing Monopoly, but according to everyone else, Dad was the only one who had a good time.

Was it still dark or had the sun begun to rise. All the question does is point out that the Resurrection always happens in the midst of the ambiguities, faulty memories, uncertain futures, ironies, dissonances, paradoxes, and gaps in life. This church where we, in John's tradition, have gathered this morning in the dark, is a place of transcendent beauty, yet the pews you sit in have been polished by the tears of a thousand mourners. How many happy weddings became sad divorces? On the other hand, how many prayers of anguish were later transformed to hymns of gratitude when healing and wholeness took place, or a when a wayward child found her way home, or when a floundering career found new direction?

Life is untidy, as probably all of you well know, my friends. It always is. The glorious Easter hymn, "The Day of Resurrection," page 210 in the Hymnal is quite old. The words were written by John of Damascus, one of the Saints of the Greek Orthodox Church. John was born in the 8th century. He became a priest late in life at St. Sabas convent near Jerusalem. He was a gifted poet. There is a story about John writing a hymn for the anticipated funeral of a fellow monk on his deathbed. After writing the hymn John started practicing it loudly. The next thing he knew, the dying monk came shuffling into the room to protest all the racket.

No wonder we celebrate Easter as the pinnacle of Christian worship. It is the message of hope, that in the midst of all this we call life, dark and light, beautiful and ugly, difficult and wondrous, stark and humorous, glorious and mundane, the Eternal light of God arises, the kingdom of God arrives, and we are being transformed each day into new creations. The ancient Hebrews could not contain themselves over the wonder of God, and they had a single word, "Hallelujah!" It means "Praise to God." It is all one word as if that is the only way to address God. Let's say it for the first time on this dark but dawning morning: Hallelujah!

~The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

SERMON
Easter Sunday – 4/4/10 – John 20:1-18
“Don’t Hold Back”

Is there an isapostolos in the house? In the Greek Orthodox tradition, that is their title for St. Mary Magdalene. Roughly translated, it means “equal to an apostle,” and well she should be. Mary is the only disciple who didn’t disappear after the crucifixion. According to John, she showed up in the dark by herself. When she found the tomb was empty, apparently she knew where some of the other disciples were and rounded up Peter and the one called the “beloved” to come to see what had happened. John notes that at least they ran to find out what Mary was talking about. The two men looked in, saw the linen wrappings – then, dare we say with a shrug of the shoulders - they went back to where they were staying, leaving Mary alone at the tomb once more.

Mary turned and saw Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him until he spoke to her. Here, we have to allow our imaginations to set the scene. My version is that she threw herself at his feet and wrapped her arms around his legs and held on for dear life. To this act of desperate love, Jesus said, “Don’t hold on to me.”

There seems to be no general consensus among biblical scholars what Jesus’ response means, so we are on our own. Today I will share with you two of my reflections, and you can allow your own thoughts to develop over the next few days. First, it could mean that Jesus is in the midst of the transformation from the country rabbi from Nazareth to becoming the portal to the Eternal for the whole world. He can’t be held back. His gospel must now spread beyond the band of 70 or so disciples to all people everywhere. Jesus cannot be reserved for the few, but now becomes the open door to God’s love for all humankind. “Don’t hold on to me.”

The second possibility is this: “Now you know what you are all about. Now you know what God’s intention is for the human family and for you in particular. Don’t hold on to me – become all you are meant to be! Stand up.” The writer of the New Testament letter to the Ephesians may have caught this when he wrote that we should, “...come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13)

Become the full glorious person you are created to be. This is Christ’s invitation to freedom. Blow the doors off any of the tombs that may be holding you in and keeping you back. Break the shells that constrict your life. Shed the chains that drag you down. Break the locks of your fears. Shake off the handcuffs of the past that restrain you. Don’t hold on to me anymore. I have come so you can stand by yourselves as the wondrous creation you were intended to be - someone in the world who replaces hate with love, indifference with compassion, greed with generosity, injustice with mercy, prejudice with openheartedness, incivility with grace.”

This is your freedom day. This is your liberation day. This is your resurrection day!
Don’t hold back. Don’t hold on to me. Become what I am and live.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

~ The Rev. Dr. Perry T. Fuller

