

**SERMONS**  
**AND COMMENTS**

FROM THE

**2006**

**Preaching Excellence Program**

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THE EPISCOPAL PREACHING FOUNDATION

**VOL. XV**





**Comments and Sermons**  
**From the 2006 Preaching Excellence Program: Vol. XV**

Edited by  
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and  
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Ever since 1992, the Episcopal Preaching Foundation has collected and edited outstanding American sermons, supported their publication annually in book form and distributed them to the Foundation's constituents. The tradition continues with this volume, the 15th in this series, but with some changes.

In past years, we also published a booklet of comments from the seminarians and faculty who attended our annual Preaching Excellence Program (PEP). This year, we are combining those comments from the 19th annual PEP Conference, held in early June 2006 at Villanova University outside Philadelphia, with the sermons and addresses delivered by the faculty at that Conference.

As in past years, seminarians who attended the Conference were selected by their seminary deans and preaching professors for their potential in preaching, and were led by a faculty of 14 excellent preaching professors and accomplished parish preachers. Also helping the seminarians improve their preaching skills in this all-expenses-paid, concentrated week of learning were special guests Dr. Thomas A. Long, Professor of Preaching at Emory University, and Dr. Cleophus J. LaRue, Professor of Homiletics at Princeton.

The seminarians benefited immensely from the sermons and lectures on preaching by the pros and from the interaction with them. In small groups of nine, each led by two faculty members, all the seminarians delivered prepared sermons as well as extemporaneous homilies that were then discussed in detail by the group. A total of 62 of them benefited from this "boot camp for preachers."

As you read these sermons and comments, I hope you agree that the Foundation is making significant strides in improving preaching in the Episcopal Church.

A. Gary Shilling  
Chairman  
Episcopal Preaching Foundation  
September 2006

## PREFACE

The Preaching Excellence Program is for students of preaching that includes both the faculty and the seminarians. We are learning together.

And so, Fr. Cesaretti began the conference reminding us that it is not just what comes out of the preacher that matters, but even more importantly, what is going on inside. Dr. Cleophus LaRue shook some of our Episcopal sensibilities when he abandoned the lectionary on Pentecost and instead opted for Jesus' parable of the talents. "What is he doing?" many of us wondered, until we realized how apt it was to consider the gifts the master entrusts to his servants as a perfect text for Pentecost. Dr. Thomas Long reminded us the basic do's and don'ts of working with the text, with our culture as well as with the people in our pastoral care. Drs. Judith McDaniel and Virginia Wiles both brought us to places we had never been when thinking about the text and how we connect with it, or sometimes miss things entirely. Fr. Brent Norris had us laughing and then feeling pierced as we realized we are all Judas to Jesus sometimes and then Fr. Philip Carr-Jones helped us say good-bye to the week with a reminder of the mystery and beauty of God that is beyond us all and yet envelopes us in God's grace.

That does not begin to recount some of the best sermons of the week which came from the seminarians. To be so saturated with preaching is a rare gift in one's life. The prayer of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation is that a week such as this will make a difference in the way the Gospel is shared. Preaching matters; it matters to the Church and it matters to the world. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to be a part of PEP are grateful to all of our bishops, professors, seminaries, home parishes and benefactors that have made it possible for us to spend this week together. This isn't the only way people will come to know the Gospel, but it surely is a crucial way. We hope these sermons will prod, inspire, teach and move you to a personal response to the invitation of Christ to be a disciple.

Yours in Christ,

Timothy J. Mulder  
Executive Director  
Episcopal Preaching Foundation

**COMMENTS FROM SEMINARIANS ATTENDING  
2006 PREACHING EXCELLENCE CONFERENCE**

“When Brent Norris concluded his sermon I gasped, realizing that I had been holding my breath as I was so engaged in what he was saying.”

—Lucy Hogan, Wesley Theological Seminary

“I came to the conference not so sure that parish ministry was my path. The support and help with sermons and proclaiming the Gospel has me leaving with new eyes.”

—Susane Methven, Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest

“The best part of the week was the variety of styles and learning from each other.”

“This week for me was transformative. I came to the conference exhausted and jaded, but by the conference’s close, I was energized, moved and in love with preaching.”

—Jason Alexander Church Divinity School of the Pacific

“I was given permission to play with the text and pushed to wrestle with the scriptures.”

—Karl Burns, Nashotah House

“I have a heart for ecumenical discussions, however, I hope this stays an Episcopal program to understand more about preaching the Gospel to Episcopalians as a church leader for that denomination.”

—Linda Loyd

“The best part of the week for me was developing relations with peers from other seminaries and dioceses.”

“I loved the informal discussions with faculty and other students about preaching, especially after Tom Long’s address.”

“Thank you for caring so much about preaching in the Episcopal Church.”

“It was helpful to learn strategies for using illustrations in preaching.”

“The student preaching has been a bridge of connection across theological chasms.”

—Hope Eakins

“Virginia Wile’s presentation on the importance of playful imagination in reading the text was an entirely new thought for me.”

“My preaching group offered some of the most amazing insights of my whole formation process over the last seven years.”

—Michael Sniffen, Drew University

“I loved the combination of homiletics professors and parish priests for our faculty.”

“I learned that every sermon will work for some people but not for others, so it’s important to preach in a variety of styles to meet different people through each style of preaching.”

“Thank you for this conference. The ability to spend a week with people who care deeply about preaching without having to worry about cooking, errands, laundry, papers, etc. is a true gift. I can’t think of a week when I have enjoyed myself more (except maybe fishing in Alaska) and had so much fun learning to be better at doing something I love.”

—Chip Connelly, General Theological Seminary

“I’m not sure this week has been so much learning something new as it has been driving basic practical principles into the bones of the preacher.”

“I loved the beautiful integration of music and liturgy with preaching.”

“Not only do the sermons I hear from those who are already in vocational ministry witness to a deep spirit of commitment to Jesus and the Gospel, the sermons I hear from the seminarians lead me to believe that they are ready to inherit a double portion of that spirit and take up the mantle of preaching the Word to future generations.”

—The Rev. Brent Norris

“It was an amazing experience. I got good, substantive feedback from folks who cared both about me as a preacher and about the Church I was training to serve.”

—Katherine Calore

## “FOLLOWING PETER THROUGH GALILEE”

The Rev. Canon Charles Cesaretti  
New Milford, Pennsylvania

“He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.” *Acts 10:42*

One who aspires to preach will be enriched and challenged by reflecting on Simon Peter.

Yes, Simon Peter the fisherman, the exasperating slow learner, the impetuous, the thrice denier, and eventually one first-rate preacher.

In reviewing that sentence, it might be well to ask how Simon Peter got to his preaching excellence. May I suggest he got there through Galilee? Yes, Galilee.

Galilee is where Jesus exercised the major part of his ministry. It is where he found Peter and Andrew, and said: “Follow me.” Galilee is where Jesus taught with authority, healed the sick, ate with sinners, fed the hungry crowd, and preached of grace, forgiveness, and salvation. “Galilee is the place where Jesus turned the world on its head.”<sup>1</sup>

Galilee is where Peter met Jesus and joined his rag-tag band of followers. The Gospel record seems to indicate that he learned or absorbed little on the three-year journey through Galilee to Jerusalem. In fact, at one point, Jesus seemingly rebukes Peter with the words he used in turning away the tempter in the wilderness: “Get thee behind me, Satan.”<sup>2</sup> One might wonder how Peter would do on the GOE’s!

Peter arrives in Jerusalem with Jesus and distinguishes himself with his swordsmanship in the garden, and his bravery in the courtyard of the high priest.<sup>3</sup>

Why would one ever suspect that this person could be a model for a preacher? I think that the key is found in the Mark’s account of Resurrection morning. When Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome “entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’”<sup>4</sup>

Ah, Galilee. In the Easter narrative, Mark’s “Galilee” is not about geography. “Galilee” is a metaphor. When the young man in the tomb suggests that Jesus is not in the tomb but had “gone ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him,” Mark is inviting his listeners to join him in resurrection. Jesus is inviting all his disciples and Peter to return to “Galilee” for their resurrection experience and their

inclusion in his universal ministry.

Yes, it is in Galilee that Peter met Jesus anew, where he experienced his resurrection and conversion, where he received the mission to “feed my lambs.”<sup>5</sup> And, it was by the Sea of Tiberias that Peter heard again, and more fully Jesus’ call to “Follow me.”

In a recent sermon, Thomas Long, who will join us later in this week, says that “Mark was trying to impart a different kind of Easter joy, trying to reveal another dimension of the Easter faith....As you come to the last verse and contemplate the unfinished ending, fretting that the Jesus story ends in mute fear and wondering where to go from here, suddenly an insight shatters the silence.” Long continues: “In other words, reader, the story isn’t over: Leave the empty tomb now and go back and read it again. Like the disciples, you did not understand this story the first time. Now that you have been to the cross and to the cemetery, read it again.”<sup>6</sup>

When Peter was with Jesus in Galilee the first time he did not understand the story. Having experienced the cross of Jesus and the experience at the garden tomb, he was called back to Galilee. He met the risen Lord, who touched Peter’s wounds of denial, guilt, and fear. Here he was able to face his own cross and death. He was converted, resurrected, and filled with the message of salvation. He received his commission. He was on his way, eventually to Caesarea to stand in the house of Cornelius to preach – to preach and testify to the crucified, risen, and living Christ.

One who aspires to preach will be enriched and challenged by reflecting on Simon Peter. Peter was able to preach the risen Christ because he had experienced death and resurrection. He may have looked like the same old weather-beaten fisherman, but something has happened on the inside. His interior portrait and landscape had been changed.

Interiority. Something on the inside of Peter had changed dramatically and his preaching had authority and authenticity. Interiority.

There is no one in the Anglican Church who has written more, or better exemplified the interior life of the priest, pastor, and preacher, than Michael Ramsey. Thanks to Douglas Dales’ recent book on Ramsey, we are recovering the great teachings and life of this giant.<sup>7</sup>

Listen, dear friends, to how Ramsey, who as Bishop of Durham, addressed those about to be ordained by him:

Often you will be knowing the joy of seeing men and women and children whose feet have been set, through your ministry, in the ways of God. But often also you will find times of frustration, baffling and mysterious; and in those time when you can see and feel no signs of usefulness or its fruits, you will know in faith, from your nearness to your Lord, that what you see and what you do are

being used by him in his love and wisdom . . . As you strive to be useful you will remember the course of our Lord's mission: thirty years of hidden life, three years of public ministry, and then the waste (as it seemed) of Calvary. Useful priest, there is your exemplar!<sup>8</sup>

May I be bold to suggest: Useful preacher, as Peter discovered, there is you exemplar.

For Ramsey, it is the interior of the priest that receives and mirrors the Gospel not in the intellect or at the externals of priest-craft. It is within the human heart that the call of God and the call of the world's needs meet. It is at this meeting place that the priest internalizes, meets, and experiences the cross and resurrection. It is here that the pain, suffering, and sin of humanity are joined to the grace, forgiveness, and salvation of God's action in Christ on the cross. Within the priest's heart, brokenness and healing meet.

It is of Galilee that Ramsey is speaking. For if preaching is to lose its shell of technique, formality, and style – its exteriority -- and become authentic and authoritative proclamation, the preacher, just like the broken and wounded Peter, must meet the risen Lord. Just as Peter's interior portrait and landscape changed, so must that of the preacher. Preachers come from Galilee.

Ramsey, even with his seeming old-fashioned theological language, appears to have grasped the topography of the metaphorical Galilee. Dales comments that for Ramsey "[the] ministry is sustained only by prayer, hard work and self-sacrifice: it entails a lifetime of service to others, and self-disciplined training in the arduous art of the cure of souls. It is re-eminently as spiritual vocation. . . ."<sup>9</sup> Galilee is that spiritual place where the priest/preacher/pastor collects both personal and corporate brokenness and clings to the pierced and wounded Jesus. Where Jesus feeds and commissions, and imparts his life-giving spirit. Galilee.

Brokenness and healing meet. It is the spiritual, internal action within the preacher that comes to express itself in the externality of preaching.

For Ramsey, in an expression of his "high" theology, the most significant externalization is located in the sacramental, liturgical action of the Eucharist, when the priest breaks the bread, and then distributes it to feed, nurture, and cure the human soul. Here we find the internal and external, the body and soul, united in harmony, mutually sustaining. He wrote in *The Christian Priest Today*:

Many lives will be healed and made strong by your teaching, your care, your love for them. . . . In the coming years you will know the wounds of Christ more than in the past, and you will also know the peace more than you know it now. And one day many will thank God for all that you will have done to make the wounds and the peace known to them.<sup>10</sup>

The exteriority of ministry also finds form and structure in preaching. Its outward and visible form flows from its inward and spiritual life.

The beauty of this formulation is that not only does it speak to the wholeness and health of a priest; it also brings together for the priest the call of God and human call, which is reflected in preaching. It is these two elements that are found so vividly in Peter's preaching in the house of Cornelius. Peter is responding to the human call and Jesus' command to preach to the people and testify.

Galilee ministry is the internal fusing of the call of the world's needs and the call of Jesus to "feed my lambs."

Lorna Kendall, Ramsey and Lady Ramsey's life-long friend and confident, wrote of her beloved Bishop Michael: "For Bishop Michael was a person who sensed the presence of God, and communicated it to others privately, and by his preaching and leading of divine worship. He spoke of Jesus with directness and simplicity born out of a deep love and personal knowledge of him. He saw others, near and far, in relation to Christ's burning heart of love and forgiveness, and this kindled within him great tenderness and sympathy. His road of prayer led him to fulfill the words of an unknown eastern monk: "Put your mind into your heart, and stand in the presence of God all day long."<sup>11</sup>

My dear friends, you who wish to preach and testify to the power of the risen Lord, heed the message to Peter in the empty Easter tomb: Jesus has gone ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."<sup>12</sup>

One who aspires to preach will be enriched and challenged by reflecting on Simon Peter. I offer up for you the ordination prayer of Bishop Michael:

Lord, take my heart and break it: break it not in the way I would like, but in the way you know to be best. And because it is you who break it, I will not be afraid, for in your hands all is safe and I am safe. Lord, take my heart and give to it your joy, not in the ways I like, but in the ways you know are best, that your joy may be filled in me. So, dear Lord, I am ready to be your deacon, ready to be your priest.<sup>13</sup>

Amen and Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

<sup>1</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Preaching Resurrection* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33, Luke 48.

<sup>3</sup> John 18.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 16:5-7.

<sup>5</sup> John 21:15-19

<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Long. Dangling gospel (Christian Century, April 4, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Dales. *Glory: The Spiritual Theology of Michael Ramsey* (Norwich: Canterbury press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey. *Durham Essays and Addresses*. Cited in Dales, p.129

<sup>9</sup> Dales. *Op. cit.*, pg. 125

<sup>10</sup> Ramsey. *The Christian Priest Today*. Cited in Dales, p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Dales, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 16:5-7.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Dales, p. 145.

## **“THE STORY TELLER”**

*Genesis 22:1-19*

Dr. Virginia Wiles

I am a teller of familiar tales. I sit upon this jagged rock, high above the ancient story. Who am I?

The old virile man trudged up the mount, each step belabored with a trust miscarried. Time to time he laid his hand against the knife buckled to his side, each brush of fingers against the hilt, unwanted test of faith. Anger at this fierce request. Those year-torn promises, stars and sand, denied in this. Each trudging step a heavy plod into the dark necessity of life. A life, unmolded to desire, compressed instead to duty's call. Each step accompanied by the son who hiked unwitting at his side, bore wood to lay upon the stone of his own sacrifice. How long that journey must have seemed, forever to the death.

I am, today, the virile man, though others call upon the son. Will there be, perchance, a ram for me, to rescue this, my child? And will I dare to trudge ahead, heavy, lay the wood and raise the knife? And will I hear the unexpected voice and stop the force of my obedient thrust? Or turn, negotiate desire, again take Hagar to solve the riddle of God's madness?

Once upon a time, a brown-cloaked man with laughing eyes teased me into the forest of play. And I said Yes, and Yes and Yes. I did not see the mount, nor son, nor wood. I thought the knife for throwing games, a carnival of joy. And here I am, this mountain, loss of dear and difficult desire. Vast mist of grief enshrouds all worlds to be. You've played a trick on me, damned gleaming-eyed bastard. I cannot bear this trudging faith of duty borne to sacrifice of love. What ram will thickets hold for me, for this, my son, my sacrificed desire?

Unless I've got the story wrong—oh god, I do.

I am the ram, not faithful, love-torn man nor longed-for child unaware. For what is life but sacred thicket, thorned particulars, and I the trapped one, willed to death, for life?

© 2005 Virginia Wiles. Dr. Wiles is Dean of the Seminary and Professor of New Testament at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, N.J.

**“BEING SEEN”***John 4:1-42*

The Rev. Katherine C. Calore  
Mt. Vernon, Missouri

I wonder about her, that Samaritan woman.  
I wonder who knows her.  
I wonder who really sees what her life is like.

For example, how many times a day  
do you think she had to go to that well?

First thing in the morning,  
Again for the noonday meal,  
Again for supper,  
again anytime someone came in from out of doors,  
because they would have to wash their feet and they would use up any water she  
had on hand,  
Again if it was a bathing day or a laundry day,  
again when the animals were brought in at the end of the day...

...how many times?  
Six or seven?  
How much water can a woman carry,  
even a strong country woman?  
How many clay jars, how many trips?

And does she have children at home?  
Having had five husbands, it's a pretty good bet.

Who watches them while she goes after water?  
Are her arms too tired,  
her back too aching,  
to lift a toddler after carrying those stone jars  
in the heat of the day?

It's so basic, that water,  
that I expect her whole life revolves around it.  
Get the water, feed the baby,

get the water, feed the men,  
get the water, feed the animals,  
get the water, wash the clothes,  
get the water, feed the baby,  
get the water, feed the men...

And she can't afford to get any of it wrong,  
she can't afford to get tired or sick  
or stop to play with a child,  
because the man she lives with  
who is not her husband  
could throw her out of his house at any time,  
so he has to be put first.  
He has to be kept happy.

Her life,  
and perhaps her children's lives,  
depend on it.

So, it's no wonder then, that when Jesus said,  
"I would give you living water so that you'll never be thirsty again," she jumped on  
that and said,

"That would be so great,  
because it's a real pain to have to keep  
coming back here all the time  
just to get water."

She is slow to get it,  
as most people seem to be in John's Gospel.  
It's not really her fault.  
Jesus can be so annoyingly mystical in John's Gospel, it's hard for anyone to  
understand him

Nicodemus didn't understand,  
and he was a teacher.  
The disciples never understand,  
and they were with Jesus 24/7.

Of course they don't,  
they are so busy looking for the thing that they are expecting

that they can't see the unexpected gift  
right in front of them.

The problem for most people,  
and for most people in John's Gospel,  
is that we have great expectations--  
great, but entirely inaccurate.

But, I don't think that's the problem with this Samaritan woman  
that Jesus is talking to today at the well.  
She's different.  
She doesn't get it,  
but she's not like the others who John tells us about.  
It's not that she is expecting God to come differently than he has come.  
It's that she is not expecting him at all.

Why would she?  
This woman is invisible,  
beneath anyone's notice.

It's not the gift that's unexpected in this story--  
she knows the Messiah's coming. Someday.

No, what's unexpected is the receiver.

It never occurred to her  
that the gift would be offered to her.  
Her race is wrong:  
she is a Samaritan, not a Jew.

Her religion is wrong:  
the Samaritans worshiped the God of Israel,  
but in the wrong place,  
that is,  
they don't worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and they worship with all the  
wrong clergy  
and all the wrong rituals.

Her gender is wrong:  
as a woman she is legal property of her closest

male relative--  
assuming she has any,  
and it's worse for her if she doesn't--  
and as such she has no rights or standing,  
she does not attend public worship,  
and cannot read or discuss the Scriptures at all.

Her social status is wrong:  
Jesus reminds her that she has had five husbands and the one she has now is not  
her husband.

Is she an adulteress?  
A prostitute?  
A divorcee?  
A murderess?

I'm inclined to think she's a victim of her circumstances,  
doing the only thing she can think of to ensure  
her own survival.

We don't know, but in any case she is not respectable.

It's not an accident that she is the only one Jesus encounters at that well.

Other women go to that well to draw water, too,  
But they go in the morning and the evening,  
in the cool of the day.

This woman is not allowed to go there  
when respectable women are around.  
She is an outcast.  
She is invisible,  
because the other women refuse to look at her,  
refuse to see her.

Everyone thinks they know her, but they don't.  
Everyone thinks they know what a disreputable woman is like,  
but they don't know her.

She is cloaked in her shame,  
hidden from their eyes,

and they don't see her.

So,  
if she ever thought about the coming of the Messiah,  
she probably thought he would come to the Temple,  
to Mount Sinai,  
even to Bethlehem,  
but he would not come to Samaria,  
and he would not come to a woman,  
and he would not come to a sinner.

She knew she was exactly the kind of person that God wouldn't want to look upon.

And she may indeed have given it some thought, because we who have her story know that she was intelligent and thoughtful,  
but chances are there wasn't that much time for deep thoughts,  
what with the five husbands and the children  
and, well, you know.

All that water.

But today she loses her invisibility.  
Someone looks at her, and sees her.

She's at the well,  
and this strange Jewish man talks to her:  
two things to completely stymie this woman--  
men don't talk to women  
and Jews don't talk to Samaritans.

And she talks back,  
which she is absolutely not supposed to do,  
but I'm sure she knows by now that there's  
a certain degree of freedom in invisibility.

The funny thing is, Jesus does kind of scold her,  
but it's not for breaking the rules.

Obviously, having just spoken first to a person who is off limits, Jesus could not

care less about the social code.  
No, Jesus scolds her for asking the wrong question.

She asks why he would even talk to her,  
How is it that he could see her when nobody else did?

But for Jesus that question is nothing more than a technicality, I guess,  
because he has something  
much more important in mind.

Jesus wants her to ask for her life and her soul  
and her salvation  
and her purity  
and her integrity.

Jesus wants her to be visible, even to herself,  
to see herself as he sees her,  
to drink the waters of life gushing up to eternity.

She was asking far too little of God,  
When he wanted to give her everything.

Even though she was the least of the least,  
The worst of the worst,  
too embarrassing even to look at,  
and no respectable people  
would associate with her.

I think this is why, a little bit later in the story,  
she goes back to her town,  
and tells people what happened  
and she says, "He can't be the Messiah, can he?"

I think her question might really have been,  
"The Messiah wouldn't talk to me like that,  
would he?  
The Messiah wouldn't show me that kind of respect,  
would he?  
Nobody else around here does, so why would he?"  
A lifetime of invisibility can make you doubt yourself.  
A lifetime of being overlooked can make you question it when someone actually

bothers to see you.

A more respectable woman, or better yet, a man, might say,  
“Why not?”

    If the Messiah is coming,  
        he's got to talk to someone,  
so why shouldn't he speak to me?”  
But not our Samaritan friend.

She doubts herself because she knows she can't be  
    the one to get a message from God.  
Not when she doesn't even get a hello from her neighbors.  
That feeling of being invisible is  
    one of the worst indignities people can suffer.  
It can reduce a person to nothing,  
    even in his or her own mind.

It strips away a person's dignity layer by layer, because it insists,  
    we expect nothing from you,  
        we will accept nothing from you,  
        you have nothing to offer us.  
You are in fact, nothing.  
Hear that enough, you begin to believe it.

The Samaritan woman doubts Jesus because he speaks to her,  
    and there's got to be something wrong  
        with a man who will look a woman straight  
        in the eyes like an equal.

There's got to be something a bit strange  
    about a healthy young man  
        who will see her as a human being  
and not as a means to his own ends.

There's got to be something off about a rabbi  
    who talks theology with a sinner.  
Doesn't there?  
He can't be the Messiah, can he?

He really saw me,

deep, deep down,  
    he knew everything about me,  
    and still he let me serve him.

But do you see what she has done?  
She has left her water jar and run into town and planted her body in front of them  
as they hurried down the streets,  
    blocking their way when they would walk  
    around her,  
        forcing them finally to see her.

This morning she was invisible,  
    looked over,  
        looked past,  
            looked through.

This morning nobody would see her, but now,  
    after spending time with Jesus,  
        she knows better.

Even in her doubt,  
she has been seen by the Lord,  
looked at and known through and through,  
    and I hope she will never consent  
to be invisible again.

There are no invisible people in Jesus' eyes.  
Jesus' eyes see everything,  
    every last person, to the depths of their souls.

How terrifying.  
Because if Jesus sees that the Samaritan woman  
has been treated as though she were invisible,  
    he also sees who neglected to look at her.

And any one of us may, in fact,  
have been the one who walked past her,  
looked through her,  
    and didn't see a thing.

We who claim some affinity with Christ,  
some influence by the Holy Spirit,  
some common humanity with all people,  
we look through those people  
as though they don't exist.

Jesus sees who we claim to be and utterly fail to be.

And I'm not talking about the homeless beggars on the city streets.  
I'm not talking about the horrors of war  
or the epidemics of disease.  
They're not invisible.  
We see them, we just pretend not to...  
...that's a whole 'nother thing.

I'm talking about people we sit in class with,  
people we worship with,  
people we sit around tables with at conference mixers,  
people who are suffering...  
or, heck, maybe they're not suffering,  
but they're there, and we don't see them.

Hi,  
how are you,  
fine,  
how are you,  
fine,  
thanks.

Just fine,  
snug beneath my  
Invisibility Cloak of shame and isolation,  
don't worry about me,  
nothing to see here folks.

Like the Samaritans in our story,  
we do not see what's right in front of us  
until someone plants herself in our path  
and demands that we see her as Jesus does.

But most people will not do that.  
And so,  
most people will continue to be invisible,  
and we will continue to treat them that way.  
Jesus knows our sins of omission.  
Jesus knows who we have failed to see.

How terrible for us.  
But how thrilling, as well.

Because Jesus sees that the Samaritan woman  
is a sinner.  
Jesus sees what she is,  
          what she has done,  
but he also sees what she could be,  
          what she could do.

In her Jesus sees both sinner and apostle.  
And he offers her spirit, truth, and water.  
It's so basic, that water,  
that I expect her whole life revolves around it now.

So could ours.  
Jesus sees each of us,  
sees what we are and what we have done,  
          but also sees what we could be  
          and what we could do.

Each of us in Jesus' eyes is sinner and apostle,  
called to see truly,  
because we have been truly seen.

**“LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT...”***Ephesians 5:6-20*

The Reverend Hope H. Eakins  
Barrington, R.I.

“Live as children of light ...”

One of my children must have missed hearing that advice from Ephesians. It was many years ago, and he was five and had not yet developed a taste for salad. In fact, he hated almost everything that was green. Our family table nestled up against a large window, beneath which was a long radiator, and Danny was delighted to find that he could clean his plate quick as a wink if he reached his hand beneath that table and deposited his lettuce there on the convenient radiator shelf. But, as we know, God has given parents eyes in the back of their heads, a promise not given in Holy Scripture, but one with its own truth, so I caught onto the lettuce disposal scheme pretty quickly. “Danny,” I asked, what have you done?” With eyes full of innocence, Danny pointed to his clean plate. What he had done, he declared, was to eat his whole dinner. He couldn’t see the lettuce; we couldn’t see the lettuce, and after all, for a five year old, when lettuce is out of sight, perhaps it really isn’t there at all.

All of us have had the hope that our transgressions will not be discovered. All of us have pretended to the world and to ourselves and to our God that we are innocent of wrongdoing, and the things we try to cover up are much more destructive than hiding some uneaten salad. Sins of the darkness, sins like embezzlement, infidelity, child and spousal abuse don’t take place in public; they require secrecy and concealment in their commission, in the public cover-up that must follow, and in personal delusions like “I’m just borrowing the money” or “My wife doesn’t understand me.”

The Church can get stuck in darkness as well. Several years ago, our family visited an historic Episcopal parish on Maryland’s Eastern shore. We were there on a Saturday, and a very spiffily dressed docent showed us the colonial communion silver, gave us a well-recounted history of the parish, and invited us to worship there the next day. Having also been invited by a Methodist friend to what she called her “black church”, we asked the docent if the Episcopal parish were racially integrated. “Oh, no,” said the docent, “Most of them can’t read, so they have their own church down the road.” Hers was an assumption that had never been checked in the light, had never even seen the need for Christ’s redeeming light, for when we went to that so-called black church, the parishioners were, of course, all quite literate; they welcomed us with open hearts, and our children, who

usually thought that Church services were endless, actually found the two hour service very enjoyable.

Families get stuck in the darkness too. There is the family having a feud, not a real Hatfield and McCoy battle but enmity strong enough to keep the generations suspicious and separated. And when you ask what's going on, no one really remembers what the feud is about. "Jerry insulted my mom years ago," someone remembers, but details of the insult are far less well recalled than today's hostility. What's more, it seems that the longer a feud has existed, the less interest there is in building bridges. As Jesus says, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." And yet it is God's light that we hide from, and what Jesus promises us is that nothing, nothing has the power to destroy us if we see it in God's holy light.

"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them," says the letter to the Ephesians. Do you remember cowering under your sheets when you were little, afraid that there might be monsters in your closet or under your bed? It was not enough for Mom and Dad to come into your room and tell you that the monsters were only in your imagination. You needed them to turn the lights on; you needed to see for yourself that that the snake lying in wait on your dresser was only a dangling sock. Nothing has greater power to engender fear and guilt than darkness. Sins look worse in the dark; forgiveness seems impossible; repentance feels overwhelming, and amendment of life too difficult even to begin. We get bound in the darkness of sin. But think what happens when we bring our failings into Christ's light. Think what happens when we are honest in naming and apologizing for something we have done wrong. Think what happens in sacramental confession. We tell God "I have squandered the inheritance of your saints, and have wandered far in a land that is waste," and then we describe the disgusting mess we have made of our lives as we confess our sins. We hear them; another person hears them; God hears them. The darkest moment of sacramental confession comes in this outward and visible naming of our sins, for in the naming, we leave ourselves no place to hide. Yet that darkest moment is the very moment when the healing, searing, cleansing, purifying heat of Christ's true light shines into our darkness to restore us and give us peace.

From the very beginning of Scripture, light conquers darkness. In the beginning, before there was light, creation was in chaos until God spoke the creative words: "Let there be light" and brought life and order to the world. Without this holy light we are lost, and so the Psalmist begs, "Send forth your light and your truth that they may lead me and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling." In God's light we can see truth and stop deluding ourselves about our power or our virtue or the contents of the dark corners of our lives. What we do not face, what we try to hide from God and from ourselves is as dangerous to the soul as

the primordial chaos, for in the dark we become afraid.

Fear is a terrible monster, as Cleo LaRue preached this morning, and fear makes us do more than bury our talents. It is fear that leads to greed and prejudice and injustice, fear that gets us looking out for Number One because there just might be enemies out there waiting to devour us. We haven't learned how to conquer our fears very well, it seems. Nations that are scared raise armies and go to battle. Churches that are scared get locked into divisions and get locked into self-righteousness. People that are scared get angry and strike out at each other. Yet fear, Scripture tells us, can be cast out only by perfect love. Only the clarifying, honest illumination of Christ's love set on fire, blazing in our hearts, can change us, can change corporate greed to concern for the world, can turn racism into brotherly love, can hammer swords into plowshares, can open closed ears to listen.

There is a lesson here for preachers, for we preachers are not immune to fear. I am not talking about the knot in your stomach when Saturday afternoon rolls around and you still haven't written a word of Sunday's sermon. What I am talking about is the fear that keeps us from preaching the Gospel. Can you address corporate greed in your sermon when the largest pledge to your parish is made by the head of a company that treats their migrant workers like cattle? Can you preach about war-mongering when the pews are filled with military personnel? Can you preach about divorce when you are no longer married to the one whom you promised to love until you were parted by death? Well, truth be told, you can't; you can't preach about any of these things very well, you can't do it sensitively, you can't do it honestly if you don't scrutinize your own motives and your own means in Christ's light. Go to the metaphorical Galilee, looking at the issues fearlessly until you are sure that your arguments are grounded in prayer and in Scripture and not in defensiveness or pride.

Can you address hard topics from the pulpit, name the injustices that are rife in our cities, the corruption of local government? Can you be courageous enough to preach on Ephesians 5 if you are a wife who squirms at the idea of being subject to her husband or on Matthew 19 if you have sold all you have not to give it to the poor but to buy a new house. And wrestle with these hard texts you must, for how will God's word be heard if you do not preach it? You are called to raise these questions, first within yourself, and then within your congregation, to open them up and hold them in Christ's light. Ask the hard questions until you have hard answers, for if you shy away from the hard texts, your sermons will probably be so washed out and banal that they will be ignored.

A restaurant called Steak n Shake was founded in 1934 in Normal, Illinois. Gus Belt, the restaurant's founder, would wait for the busiest time at his hamburger stand, wheel in a barrel of steaks, grind the steaks into burgers and cook those burgers on an open fire in plain view of the customers. Mr. Belt's slogan is the

slogan and policy of Steak n Shake to this day: "If It's In Sight It Must Be Right." Whether written on a restaurant menu or written in the Gospel, it is true. Things that we keep in the darkness will fester until they kill us, and what we bring into God's light will give us life.

You are created as children of light, called to shine like beacons, reflecting and glowing with Christ's light, dispelling the darkness. Go and live as children of light. Go and shine.

## “A CHANGE OF CHARACTER”

*John 9:1-38*

The Rev. Dr. Judith McDaniel  
Howard Chandler Robbins Professor of Homiletics  
Virginia Theological Seminary

The gospel story for today is an elaborate version of an event that happens to each of us virtually every week. The event is what is commonly called a category mistake. For example, you are seated in a restaurant and the waiter refills your water glass without you having to ask. “Thank you,” you say. “No problem,” replies the waiter. You weren’t talking about problems. You haven’t even raised the fact that the water level in your glass is down an inch or so. You are simply responding to an act of attention on the part of the waiter. You are expressing gratitude. But instead of replying, “You’re welcome,” the waiter changes the tenor of the conversation from thanksgiving to difficulty. You and the waiter are holding a conversation, but each is participating in an exchange of a different character, an unconscious category mistake. In this case, the category mistake is less a failure to understand than simply a flawed idiomatic habit.

Then consider televised political debates: The moderator asks a question; and instead of answering the question, the candidate shifts his answer into something he wants to talk about. Without acknowledging failure, the moderator then asks the same question of the other candidate, and the identical thing happens: The candidate shifts into another venue. Thus the debate continues...in category-mistake mode, with candidates talking past each other, all the while eluding the moderator. In this case, the candidates fully understand the issue and purposely fail to answer, a conscious category mistake.

But category mistakes happen in conversation when we aren’t consciously failing to answer. Category mistakes happen when we are trying to respond in kind. We talk past each other, failing to communicate, when we do not listen fully and, thus, fail to comprehend. In the reading that customarily precedes this morning’s gospel, for example, Jesus says to a Samaritan woman who has come to draw water from a well, “If you had asked, I would have given you living water.” And the woman responds, “You haven’t even got a bucket,” a category mistake of life-altering proportions.

In today’s gospel the category mistakes are both conscious and unconscious, both purposeful and uncomprehending. Here is the story of a worshipper who moves from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary, from coping with the absence of God to living in God’s presence, from blindness to sight. For here is a man who has been brought up in the synagogue, whose parents are faithful worshippers in

the synagogue, for whom being a part of the Jewish faith defines their place in the community. Here is a man for whom categories of worship change. Here is a man whose value system is altered from intellectual to experiential, who is wrested from physical event to spiritual communion. And it is no joy ride.

Jesus' own disciples make the first category mistake: "Who sinned?" they ask, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The question of sin, who is "in" and who is "out," permeates the scene. First, physical affliction is categorized as a sign of sinfulness, a category mistake of major proportions. It isn't just that it's a mistake to assign people to categories, characterizing them as sinful or unworthy or unable. The point is that there are ways of thinking that are category mistakes. Jesus demonstrates what a mistake such categorization is. He reaches out to the man born blind and then disappears from the scene, leaving the man to follow his instructions. Immediately the man acts. He goes to the pool of Siloam, washes, and sees! But then his troubles begin. He tries to go home; but no joy, celebration, or welcome greet him, only questions and doubts. "Who are you?" his neighbors ask. "Who is this Jesus?" He has no answer, so his neighbors haul him up before the Pharisees.

Scene two: "Are you sure you can see? Were you really blind? Who did it? On the Sabbath! Anathema!" The one who takes action to relieve the affliction is likewise categorized by others as sinful.

You and I may have a little trouble understanding this particular complaint from the Pharisees. We've moved from calling the principal day of worship the "Sabbath" to...the Lord's day to...Sunday to...the weekend. We have very little experience of the importance of the Sabbath to those first-century worshippers. For them nothing takes precedence over the Sabbath, but also nothing but worship is to be accomplished on this day. So how could someone who violates the Sabbath perform miracles? They cannot believe he is a prophet, another category mistake.

Thus, scene three: They call in the man's parents. Here indeed is a pitiful prospect. Whatever joy his parents might feel at his healing is now overcome by fear. Expulsion from the synagogue and social disgrace are a high price to pay for having a son specially blessed by God. This price they are unwilling to pay. Their mistake comes from different motivation than that of the Pharisees, but it is just as purposeful and just as uncomprehending.

As the drama approaches its climax, we are tempted to ask, "Where has Jesus gone? Why is this man being hounded? He is a good Jew. He has never asked to be healed, so why isn't he getting some kind of support? Where is God?" Perhaps no biblical story illustrates quite so dramatically the truth of our own experience: God's favor more often leads into than away from difficulties. A relationship with God does not remove one from but often places one in the

line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights and turbulent days are offering false comfort. For the worst is about to happen to this man: He is going to be denounced, along with Jesus, and expelled from his community as a sinner. He will no longer be welcome at his old place of worship. He will no longer be part of the kinship that gives him identity. He will be a human without a place. His entire character will be a category mistake.

From Roman catacomb frescoes of the second century, records of pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the fourth century, and Milanese, Syrian, Jacobite, and Greek liturgies, we know that the earliest Christians understood today's gospel to bear witness to baptism and the meaning of Christian initiation. In line with ancient tradition, we read on consecutive Sundays the conversion of the woman at the well together with the story of the blind man whose sight is restored in the Pool of Siloam and then the raising of Lazarus from the dead and understand all three stories to hold up before us Christian formation and change from one category of character to another. Focusing on today's story of formation, we recognize the transformation of individual character but we also cannot avoid acknowledging that the worshipping community has character as well. The author of the gospel according to John has placed in this passage a prominent symbol (9:22), a signal of significance found in only two other places (12:42; 16:2) in this gospel. Here we are reminded that the character of the first Christians was Hebrew, and they wanted to remain so. They wanted to continue worshipping in the synagogue, simply adding to their adoration of God their new understanding in the light of Christ. But the community of worship in which they lived and moved and had their being would not let them give voice to their new understanding. "Stay in character," preached the Synagogue community, "or we will cast you out." And cast out they were.

Just as surely as synagogue congregations had character then, each church congregation has character and personality of its own today. And congregations, too, make category mistakes: They forget what their character is. They forget that their character is to reach for something more than they are. How that reaching, striving character is communicated is the responsibility of the entire worshipping community; for congregations preach. "Preaching is not...one person's persuasive address. It is the ceaseless activity of the church." Congregations preach and do Christian formation by giving voice to the unique language and practices of the Christian faith. When you and I walk into a nave filled with symbols, preaching has already started; for symbols communicate. The body language of worshippers communicates. Congregations preach by the way they worship, by the way they do adult education, by the way they steward their resources, by the way they take care of their buildings, by the way they do outreach. Sometimes category mistakes

happen. Sometimes congregations lose sight and understanding. A system responds to its lowest level; so a congregation must constantly ask itself, "What character am I communicating? Am I simply mirroring the categories of the culture surrounding me? Am I preaching self-satisfaction because I am unwilling to disturb the comfort level I have attained? Or am I reaching beyond myself to new life?"

A man born blind has his eyes opened and his whole character changes. That change costs him dearly, and that cost is a blessing. That cost is a blessing because with each obstacle, he grows in faith. That cost is a blessing because as he meets each challenge, he becomes more open to the light. That change of character, that reaching out is a blessing because it makes of him a witness; and in that costly witness is blessing, for it is then that Jesus returns.

**“IN THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS”**

The Feast of St. Anskar  
*Acts 1:1-9 and Mark 6:7-13*  
The Rev. William Eakins  
Barrington, R.I.

From the Collect for today: “Keep your Church, O Lord, from discouragement in the day of small things.”

Why are you here? What happened in your life that has brought you to this chapel on a rainy afternoon in June? You do realize that you could be lots of other interesting places and doing all manner of other interesting things. Yet we are here in this place, gathered in worship as a community deeply concerned about the business of being preachers, people who believe preaching is no small thing. How did this happen to us? Each of us will have a different story to tell, yet I imagine what we all have in common is a sense that somehow, somewhere we heard God call us to mission, and we responded, “Here I am, send me.” Thus began the risky but exciting adventure that has led us to where we are today, to be those who desire to speak and dare to speak in God’s name.

That’s the way it was for the twelve. Jesus called Peter, James, John, Andrew and the rest to come follow him. And then Jesus sent them out to preach and to heal. He told them to take no excess baggage, but to trust that what they needed would be provided. Jesus warned them not to be deterred by those who would not listen to them. And the disciples went forth and obeyed.

Today we are remembering another Christian who heard the call of Christ and obeyed. He is Anskar, ninth century missionary to Denmark and Sweden. His feast day is actually February 3 but I have chosen to commemorate Anskar’s life this afternoon because his story has often comforted me when the adventure of ministry has not turned out as I had hoped, when I have been discouraged in the day of small things.

Anskar was born in France in 801 and educated in the first-rate monastery school there. He became an outstanding scholar and a teacher and was chosen while still a young monk to be the head of a new monastery school established in Germany. There the 25 year old Anskar heard a voice which changed his life. He heard God tell him: “Go and return to me crowned with martyrdom.” (I think that Anskar might not have responded quite so readily had he been praying in a chapel with martyrs depicted like they are here!) However, when the King of Denmark sought missionaries for that country from Germany, Anskar was ready. His monastic brethren were astonished that Anskar would wish to leave them to

deal with unknown and barbarous folks. But Anskar was not to be deterred from his mission. Off he went to Denmark and worked conscientiously to preach the Good News of Christ. His efforts, however, met with little success. There were very few converts. Another heavenly vision gave Anskar fresh courage. This time the voice said, "Go and declare the work of God to the nations." Shortly afterward, Anskar was asked to take the Gospel to Sweden and he eagerly set forth. However, the financial support that Anskar anticipated did not materialize, and this disappointment frustrated the mission. Still, Anskar labored on. After twenty-two years of dedicated and often dangerous work to win souls to Christ, the visible results were few. Anskar had succeeded in planting two churches in Denmark, and sending one priest to Sweden. The seeds of Anskar's efforts in Denmark and Sweden were not to bear fruit until three generations later when the circumstances that hindered the spread of Christianity - Viking raids, internal weakness in the Church, and low missionary enthusiasm - began to change. Only then was a rich harvest of converts possible.

Anskar's story is both a caution and an encouragement to me.

Here's the caution. Preaching the Gospel is about sowing good seed, not reaping the harvest; about proclaiming God's word, not human response, about faithfulness not success. How easy it is - how easy it is for ME - to forget these truths.

Shortly after I retired, I was asked to sign on for a three month stint as a supply priest in a parish that had seen better days. Membership had shrunk to a handful of families, and the congregation had been unable to afford a full time priest for some years. "Sure," I told the deployment officer, "I'll give it a try," and then I started to spin out a little fantasy. Three months! I wonder if I couldn't turn this place around in that time: building attendance, pumping up enthusiasm, and maybe even drawing in some new members. Who knows what might be done with a little good preaching and skilled pastoral leadership.

It took only a couple of Sunday's among the folks of St. Sad-Sack's to puncture my romantic notions. These were people who did not want to change. They were content to remain just as they were and always had been. Try though I did in the months I was with them to get them excited about the God whose power and love can raise the dead to new life, the God who makes all things new, the folks of Down-in-the-Dumps were not interested. Attendance did not improve; no new members appeared; the parish mood remained stoic and depressed.

By all outward appearances, my ministry at St. Sad-Sack's was a failure, especially when measured against the unrealistic hopes I had brought to the experience. What went wrong? I had done my best to be a faithful priest to them. I had preached the Gospel and celebrated the sacraments to the best of my ability. Why didn't the

people respond? Probably, like Anskar, I'll never have an answer to that question. Maybe I was not the right priest for that congregation just then. Maybe the people were not ready to hear. Maybe they just needed more time. But maybe, but just maybe, my ministry in that place has had or will yet have an impact that I will never know.

The story of Anskar is encouraging as well as cautionary. In due season, in this case a hundred years later, the good seed that Anskar sowed during his missionary labors sprouted and took root among the people of Scandinavia. Anskar's preaching of Christ must have had more impact than he saw at the time. Here and there, minds and hearts must have been opened to the Gospel and lives were changed. Those changed must have told others who themselves then believed and so the word of God gradually spread from person to person, village to village. When, many years later Christian missionaries again ventured into Denmark and Sweden the ground was prepared and ripe for wide-spread conversion. Anskar is a good example of the truth of Jesus' words, "One sows, another reaps."

We live in a time not unlike Anskar's. We fear not Vikings but terrorist extremists; our Church, like Anskar's, is weakened by internal divisions; for us, as well, missionary zeal is at a low ebb. Where I am from in Rhode Island, the Diocese will likely be closing ten of our parishes this year, and one other parish has left the Episcopal Church. How are we to preach the Gospel in such a time? We will find ourselves discouraged if we look only for big things, impressive results. But if we preach to proclaim the word of God, to sow good seed because this is what God has called us to do, then we can be filled with courage and satisfaction even if the results are small. Like the twelve, Christian disciples today need to venture forth trusting the future to God. An important part of that trust is freeing ourselves from the excess baggage of preconceived expectations of the outcome of our efforts. As has often been observed, God's plans are not our plans.

We preachers will often be aware of the foolishness, the inadequacy of our preaching. Sometimes those sermons will really be foolish and inadequate. Other times, our sermons, though well-crafted and well-delivered, will all too often seem to fall on deaf ears. It is at those times that we need to recall the promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah that God's word "shall never return empty" but "shall always accomplish that for which God sends it." There will be times when we preachers will be surprised by wonderful reminders of the truth of this promise: people will tell us that something we said healed a marriage or changed a career. It is humbling then to be aware of how God has used words that we cannot remember to be instruments of redemption. Yet most of the time, we preachers sow the good seed of God's word without really knowing its effect.

What a relief it is that ministry is not all about us but all about God! Anskar knew this and persevered in the day of small things. Like Anskar, preach the word in season and out of season. Dare to dream big dreams. Don't give up, but leave the results up to God. Who knows what might happen?

## **“LIKE A BIG PIZZA PIE”**

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Rector, Grace Church, New York City

And the angel of the Lord appeared to (Moses) in a flame of fire out of the midst of a burning bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

-*Exodus 3:2*

What do you make of Moses and his encounter with God blazing before his eyes in a burning bush? Have you ever known a time in your life when God became strikingly real -- when God for you became overwhelmingly present? I have. I was in my second year at General Seminary, agonizing over a paper on the topic of God and suffering. Why does the omnipotent God allow death and mourning and crying and pain? For weeks I had thought and prayed and worked and worried and wrestled with the relevant Biblical passages. When the time came to write I had many things to say, not a word of which was my own. I had many things to report on second-hand, but that was all. I didn't want to admit it, but "second hand" would have described much of my Christian faith at the time. Like Moses, before he encountered God in the burning bush, I hadn't yet for myself been able to name God's living, active presence. To be sure, I knew some things about God and the church. But the case could have been made that while I knew about God, I didn't really know God.

That all changed for me on a November evening in 1987. As I sat at my desk working on the paper, something completely unexpected happened. Suddenly, like a wave washing over me, it all came together. In a wonderful combination of both mind and emotion, Jesus made perfect sense to me. I came to know the cross and resurrection of Jesus as God's gift to me. I knew without a doubt that nothing in all of creation could separate me from the love of God, that I was an heir of God, that I could call God "Abba! Father!" An intense, urgent joy welled up within me. I stood from my desk and paced back and forth in my tiny little room saying to myself, "Of course, of course." I walked around for the next several days with my feet a few inches off the ground. The experience didn't last; it was fleeting; it vanished. (Mountain-top moments always do.) But it was profound enough that I will always remember it. Since then I have been searching for words to describe the experience, but no words ever seem to capture it.

Some time ago Tim Mulder, the Executive Director of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation, informed me that for my conference sermon I could pick any set of lessons I wanted. I had a moment of inspiration: since I'll be preaching on Trinity Sunday back home in New York, let's have a lesson on multi-tasking.

Let's do Trinity Sunday in advance here at Villanova. So what follows is what I will say, in large part, to the good folks at Grace Church in New York this coming Sunday.

Ever since medieval times the church has set aside a Sunday of each year to observe and celebrate something people honestly have a difficult time getting worked up about and celebrating: the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is the church's teaching about the nature of God – a subject that no human words can ever possibly capture. But let me try to explain, very roughly, how we arrived at where we are.

Certainly by the time of Jesus, people had come to experience, or at least suspect the existence of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, the universe around us, and all things visible and invisible. They looked at the star lit heaven, they stood upon the stable earth, they sailed across the deep salt sea, and they experienced the maker of all this as much, much greater than they were. They knew God as the transcendent One who dwelled in light inaccessible from before time and forever. Then along came Jesus of Nazareth, and the impact of his life, death, and resurrection on people was such that they were certain God himself had visited them in this individual. They experienced Jesus as God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, of one Being with the Father. After Jesus came the Day of Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit descended upon the people, and filled them with such new life that they could only conclude this was yet a third totally unique visitation of divinity.

So the experience of God was as Father, Son, and Spirit. But which was God? Or were all three God? If all three were God, how could God be One, as Jesus, Moses, and the prophets had taught? To put the whole mystery in the mouth of a Sunday School child I once knew: "If Jesus was God, then who was in charge of heaven when Jesus was on earth?" "Good question, young man," I replied. "And thank you for asking; maybe we'll have time to deal with that another day," said I.

Trinity Sunday, I'm afraid, is that other day. The doctrine of the Trinity attempts to address these questions – it attempts to summarize the human experience of God. The Trinity states that God the Father is God, that God the Son is God, and that God the Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods but One; the One God exists in Three Persons and One Substance. That's where all the three-in-one and one-in-three talk originates. And it's right about now – right at this moment on Trinity Sunday every year –that you will see the eyes of your congregation glaze over, a sure sign that their minds are wandering far, far away. I remember when my little brother and I were in our church's boys choir together as we were growing up. For the bishop's visitation one year we had rehearsed the great hymn, St.

Patrick's Breastplate, over and over again, with the phrase "the Three in One, and One in Three." After a while, my brother, who was all of about 8 at the time, pointed to the phrase in his hymnal and whispered impatiently to me, "What does this mean?" I distinctly remember the answer I gave him because I thought it was wise and mature. I told him that some hymn writers, in fact, run out of things to say, but still have notes of music to fill with words. So what they do is simply make up "filler phrases" to complete the tune. A filler phrase could be completely nonsensical, just so long as it matched the notes and completed the rhyme. Beyond that I couldn't imagine these Trinitarian words having any meaning or relevance, whatsoever. The doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible.

Do you know what? That's precisely the point. The Trinity is not meant to be comprehended. God is not meant to be understood. God is meant to be experienced. If the doctrine of the Trinity causes your mind to wander, that's because you're probably starting with the doctrine and then trying to get from there to the experience. But that's putting the cart before the horse. Instead, we start with the experience of God, and then comes the doctrine.

Let me try to explain. Imagine this hypothetical situation: You decide to go out to dinner one evening to enjoy your favorite food. Feel free to substitute whatever dish you want here, but for the common good let's say that your favorite dish is pizza. In fact, the word pizza itself is somewhat sacred to you; you say it with reverence. The mere mention of the word causes you to pause, close your eyes, and anticipate your next trip to the pizzeria. Well, the time has come and the pizza set before you is an absolute masterpiece to be devoured. The experience of eating the pizza with friends fills you with delight. Now it so happens that you are a food critic for the local paper, and one reason why you went to this particular restaurant was to write a review of the food. So when you go home you sit down at your desk, turn on your computer, and search for words to describe the pizza. You do your best to find paragraphs and phrases and sentences to convey the reality of toppings and cheese and sauce. But ultimately you know that a verbal description of such a meal can hardly capture, let alone communicate, the experience of the actual substance hitting your taste buds.

The next morning people open the paper and read the review you have written. Imagine that one person who has never before tasted pizza reads your review, studies it, analyses it, and without ever going to the restaurant or personally sampling a pizza, tries to become an authority on the pizzeria and the pizza. But how much will that person know? Not much, because the experience itself is lacking. It's all second-hand. The doctrine of the Trinity in its fully developed form is a bit like that written review. It is a verbal description of something that cannot be contained in words. It is words and sentences and reflections based on

the experience of the true and only God actually hitting your taste buds, blazing before your eyes, and burning within your heart with a holy fire. Without the experience, the words make little sense.

Jesus seemed to think this was the problem of one named Nicodemus: he'd read all about pizza, but he'd never really sampled it. We have a conversation between the two recorded in today's reading from the Gospel of John. Nicodemus was a good man who became a follower of Jesus. John describes him as a Pharisee, which means he was a strict keeper of the Law. He was a ruler of the Jews, which means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the top seventy Jewish officials in all of Judaism. And he was a teacher of Israel -- a rabbi -- who instructed other Jews in the ways of God. Nicodemus knew about God; he studied God; he taught the subject of God; he understood God as best as anyone assumed God could be understood. But in the conversation he had with Jesus, Nicodemus learned that what he knew of God was next to nothing. Nicodemus began the conversation by saying, we know. What Jesus basically had to say to Nicodemus was: no, you don't know God because you haven't experienced God for yourself. You may know about God, but you don't know God because you haven't been born anew, or born from above, or born again.

Nicodemus is like the person who tries to know all about pizza from your written review in the paper. He is like the drama critic who has never acted in a play. He is like the sports writer who has never played the game. Imagine if Nicodemus were to live today and buy a computer, for example. He would ignore the computer and spend a life time reading the manual. If he were to have you over for dinner, you would sit around the dining room table reading cookbooks and discussing recipes and the nutritional value of food. You might even recite some of the recipes together, and sing some peppy songs about the food, but you'd never get around to experiencing the food first hand. Of course, we are being unfair to Nicodemus, but only to highlight a point: Nicodemus had made a living out of studying and critiquing and analyzing God, but never actually experiencing and participating in God himself. It was all second hand. He was so caught up in trying to understand, that he never got around to the experience itself. And that's putting the cart before the horse. That's putting the explanation before the experience. That was his problem, said Jesus.

That can be our problem too if we aren't careful. Especially on Trinity Sunday, we can get so caught up in trying to understand God that we wind up missing or distrusting the experience of God. How many genuine moments of divine revelation have we dismissed as coincidence, or discounted due to the cynicism of our age? What Jesus had to say to Nicodemus is good news when you think about it. His message is that you don't have to understand God in order

to enjoy God. You don't have to understand the wind in order to feel it. You don't have to understand the Eucharist in order to receive it and be nourished by it. All we need to know is that we have a place at the table set for us. God is to be experienced. O taste and see how gracious the Lord is, proclaimed the Psalmist (34:8).

Do you still think the Trinity is an incomprehensible tangle of filler phrases that you must untangle before you can truly experience God? A marvelous story is told of Karl Barth, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the 20th century or any other. From before World War One until his death in 1968 Karl Barth was a Protestant pastor and university professor of theology who wrote and taught with passion and conviction, and had a profound influence in the Christian world. His massive work, *Church Dogmatics*, is a twenty-plus volume scholarly treatise dealing with all the aspects of Christian believing. One of my professors in seminary had listened to Karl Barth give a lecture, and he reports that merely the way Barth said the word "God" conveyed the richness and the depth of the life time of thought he had given to theology.

Toward the end of his life Karl Barth was being interviewed, and the question put to him was something on the order of, what have you learned in all these years? How would you summarize your life's work? People braced themselves for a deeply profound, yet highly technical statement that would be largely inaccessible to anyone outside of an ivory tower. The great theologian thought for a moment, and then responded: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

So if you don't understand God, relax. The love of God is an experience waiting for you – like a big pizza pie. Or in other words: when the Lord hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore!

Think about it. And let me be among the first to wish you a happy Trinity Sunday.

## **“A BEAUTIFUL THING”**

The Rev. Philip Carr-Jones, Rector  
Church of the Holy Spirit  
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All who preach the Good News will remember her for she has done a beautiful thing.

- Matthew 26:13

Jeremy Taylor wrote: Dangerous it were for the feeble mind of {human kind} to wander far into the doings of the Almighty. Our safest eloquence concerning him is our silence. Therefore our words should be wary and few.

We are completing our week having listened and responded to some forty sermons. St. Jeremy would not have enjoyed our time together. It has been a marvelous and enjoyable fellowship. If my small group was a normative experience, then in the words of the Boy Wonder, “Holy Homiletics, Batman!” Your incisive minds are capable of catching all manner of homiletical error or the trespassing of stoles in one guise or another (note: reference to a novel custom observed during a parochial visit where the stole was frequently exchanged between presbyter and laity). You have been kind and forbearing to us old timers on the faculty. Your experience of our preaching has mirrored the undulating contours of the Christian life. So, we come to our close with one more sermon, and without the benefit of a group critique (Can I hear an, “Amen!” . . . If you approach for comment after Eucharist I am likely to cover my ears and impersonate Karl Barth loudly singing, Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so).

Jesus said, All will remember her for doing a beautiful thing. Some have been discomfited that the faculty have chosen eclectic and eccentric texts rather than following the lectionary assignments for this week. I, too, have a high regard for the ordo, higher, I dare say than you who have been critical of the faculty choosings. Let me prove my lectional pedigree at the same time as we approach the twenty-sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

In over two decades in the pulpit, I have never preached on this story. This narrative is so unusual and packed with meaning and homiletical possibility. It is the only time Jesus blesses in such a way - the only time he says a disciple will be remembered. Appearing very differently in all four gospels suggests the early church understood this story to be critical to their identity. That I have not preached this particular piece of Good News is due to my pedantic, spineless, undeviating loyalty to the ordo, because of where it has been so carefully placed in the lectionary

of our prayer book. I have not preached this Good News because it is buried on Monday in Holy Week! We may intend to say Mass on the day after Palm Sunday. We may even realize our intentions so we actually remembers this woman for what she has done, but we'll be remembering her in the company of a lone Altar Guild member in a back pew angrily looking at his wristwatch.

Such an incredibly important story for our church! This is only time Jesus says that someone will be remembered for their part in the story of our salvation. All will remember her? Everyone except the dolts that designed the Episcopal Lectionary. What weren't they thinking?

Some have suggested that it was either an under-conscious sexist slight, or that the intimate contact between Jesus and the unnamed woman is too hot. The last may be closer the mark, for if you Google, "alabaster jar," you get 10,000 pages of the Da Vinci Code, the whole Da Vinci Code and nothing but the Da Vinci Code. The interest in purity codes that Jesus keeps violating in the Gospels, is not academic but downright prurient. But such a fetish diminishes her rightful place of honor. She was so important for the gospel churches to remember that each community needed its own version. The elegant power and simple beauty of Mark's story is intensified in Matthew, rearranged in Luke and fully massaged by the time John gets his hands on it. Why? Because she has done a beautiful thing.

It was truly a good thing that she did this anointing. Truly good: It was True and Good. In the alabaster jar, a well-known Egyptian coptic tradition may be in play. Certainly Matthew's magi reference this woman's activity from the beginning of the Jesus story. And the end of Matthew's story, the woman do not go to the tomb with oil. She has already done what is technically called a corporal act of mercy. Good for her to have done so. It is true to the gospel story of ultimate sacrifice. Her good, noble and true corporal act of mercy is what was necessary for Jesus' own preparation for the coming crisis. It was truly a good thing but this is not what Jesus said, and this is not why she is remembered.

It was just the right thing for her to have done. It was exactly just the right thing. Just and right. Of course, Jesus understands the claims of justice: It's not good to waste this ointment (and this is not the bargain basement stuff of Mark, this was Nieman Marcus ointment in Matthew s gospel). Of course, it is not good to ignore human need. The number of Gospel verses seeming to contradict this wisdom saying (the poor you will always have with you) maybe another reason the lectionary designers undermined Jesus' prophecy that we would all remember her. But her activity defies the simplistic false choice thinking that is so chronic among Jesus friends, then and now. Jesus gently reframes their complaint but the complexity of divine life escapes Jesus' companions, then and now.

Jesus defends her actions as just and right. Christ the Anointed One,

incarnate in Jesus, came to us as the Son of righteousness, the means of justice by injustice done. It was just the right thing, but this not what Jesus said, and this is not why she is remembered.

What she did was true and good and just and right and even powerful and lovely. Yes all those. But this is not what Jesus said, this is not why she is remembered. She has done a beautiful thing. Beautiful. This is why she is to be remembered by all who preach the Good News.

Beauty. Let us wonder about this idea of beauty. Who can blame any of us for a less than deep association with the word, purloined as it is by cosmetic society afraid of aging and dying? Consumed with covering up all evidence to support such inevitability, both men and women confuse beauty with dermatology or pharmaco-virility. I suggest we retrieve and revive our comprehension of beauty as the highest measure, the chief cause, the principal by which all other values are ordered. Surely, teleological and deontological concerns are real and those concerns visit us up close and personal when our Church slouches toward decisions about human sexuality. Look how we line up on our sides. We leap onto the scales of justice or truth or goodness or righteousness. We lunge onto our various wobbly legged tripods and platforms like so many acrobats, so confident, so brazen. Oh Lord forgive the velocity by which we choose up sides.

Are you too grasping for another way? Perhaps we would consider anew, the role of Beauty in the ethical world. Beauty is not about “nice” and “Because I liked it.” Beauty can but is not chiefly defined as that which prompts affect. Neither is Beauty found on a bumper sticker: it is not random senseless and it is certainly not equivalent to paying someone’s toll on the turnpike. Certainly, Beauty is not a thing. It is a term of judgment, as more learned historians of classic Greek philosophy among us can attest. As used and hallowed by Jesus, beauty summarizes the Paschal Mystery. Say it with me, you know the hymn so well, “Sweetest wood and sweetest iron, sweetest weight is hung on thee.” What beauty describing such horror.

It is ironic that we should mention Beauty within this peculiar chapel (unchallenged by any claim of holiness). Yet there is beauty in this room and that is one judgment on this conference. Beauty in the crucified and the risen Christ who resides in our souls and bodies; beauty that includes some very hard truths, beauty that claims the call for justice; beauty that demands unfathomable charity for all and in all; beauty that demands a search for all that is true and noble excellent and admirable following the example of Christ. So before we ask, “Is it just; is it true; is it right; is it good;” let us ask first, is it beautiful? As preachers, we might elevate Beauty as the cause and the destination for much of what we do.

We will be tempted to dilute our strong words of beauty with pretty sayings. Pretty is a part of beauty. But our vocation and calling, as we have heard

from Tom Long, is to go deeper, where the orchestral score of divine beauty finds closer approximation on our lips and in our lives. For the safest eloquence concerning the Almighty is this deep language of beauty. Before the competing claims of justice, the call to love and the demands of truth and the way of righteousness before all these is beauty. Or closer, between and among these most worthy values, is an economy of God which is beauty; a universal harmonization. Only in the language of beauty can we comprehend the mystery of Trinity and the divine life meant for us to share.

What doctrine is this I preach? Is there a doctrine of beauty? There must be. It has been placed within us from the beginning. It needs only our cooperation. We can leave this place to go forth so that in our preaching beauty finds a body, a tone and inflection. Our bodies and minds and tongues and lips can offer the fair beauty of the Lord. For the scriptures tell us, How beautiful are the words of those who preach Good News.

## **“WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?”**

*Matthew 25:14-30*

The Rev. Dr. Cleophus J. LaRue  
Francis Landey Patton  
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In the parable before us this morning there are three people on the receiving end of money. One is given five talents, another is given two talents, and a third is given one talent. In biblical times a talent was a measure of money. According to some estimates one talent was the equivalent of fifteen years of a laborer's wages. As you can see, all three people in the text have been given a substantial sum of money for the purpose of trading with it profitably in their master's absence.

The one who received five talents went immediately and put his master's money to work. The one who received two talents went immediately and put his master's money to work. But the one who received one talent dug a hole and buried his master's money in the ground.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and asked them to give an account of what they had done with their money. Those who had put their money to good use were happy to make their report. You don't mind making your report when you have done your best. The one who received five talents said to his master: I put your money to good use and I have increased my talents to ten. "Well done, good and faithful servant," said his master. The one who received two talents said: I put your money to good use and I have increased my talents to four. "Well done, good and faithful servant," said his master.

But the one who had been given one talent began scratching where he was not itching and grinning when nothing was funny. Instead of moving towards his master he began to do a back step away from his master. He said to his master, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground, here you have what is yours." Fear caused him to act irresponsibly with that which had been entrusted to him for a season.

Many of us respond to this parable by saying, "Oh, how silly, how foolish, how irrational and unreasonable for this person to be afraid simply because he had been given only one talent." But in reality we should not be too harsh on this man, for Jesus intends for us to see ourselves in this man. This person with one talent is us and we are that person. For we are all afraid of something. It may yet to be revealed publicly. It may yet reside in the inner recesses of our hearts, but we are all afraid of something just like this person in the text. Something that keeps us from

being all that God would have us to be; something that keeps us from coming to full maturity in the faith.

What are we afraid of? Some people are afraid of the past. There is some unfortunate incident, some grave error, some mistake in judgment, some word or deed spoken or done that they wish a thousand times they could call back. So they live in fear hoping such things in their past will never see the light of day.

(I remind us here not to be too critical of people when skeletons from their closet are revealed, for it is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who reminds us that, "all houses wherein men have lived and died are haunted houses.") Yes, we all live in haunted houses and we never know when a ghost from our past is coming home to haunt us.

Some people live in fear of the present. This is especially true of people who have come up the rough side of the mountain. People for whom life has not been easy. People who have born their burdens in the heat of the day. People who have worked hard to get where they are. People who have struggled to pay for a home, sacrificed to send children to school, and saved to have something in retirement. These people if not careful can find themselves fearful of the present; fearful that all they've managed to gain could be lost in an instant. And in this day of cutbacks, layoffs, pink slips, and reductions in force such fears are not so unreasonable. Langston Hughes spoke for many of us when he said, "life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

Then there are those who fear the future. This is especially true of senior citizens as they begin to mature in years and move on to the twilight of their days. Even those who have trusted God all their lives can at times find themselves fearing what tomorrow may bring: Lord will my health hold out? Will I be able to stay in my right mind? Will I become a burden to my children? Will they have to put me in a nursing home? Will they have to break my door down and find me sprawled out on the floor unnoticed and unattended? God, what will my end be?

We are all afraid of something and at times that fear causes us to act irresponsibly with that which God has entrusted to each of us. We fear exposure. We fear loneliness. We fear sickness. We fear disease. We fear terror. We fear death. We are afraid of not being able to handle the threat of a special situation. We fear that something will come up in our lives at a time when we are most vulnerable and least able to handle it.

Mark Twain is supposed to have said that ninety percent of the stuff we worry about never happens. Ponder that for a moment: Ninety percent of the stuff we worry about never happens. The Protestant reformer John Calvin said the human mind is a factory of fears. We all fear something.

That which we fear will eventually manifest itself in our lives some how.

Sometimes what we fear shows up in our lives as a loss of direction. The person with five talents moved out in one direction. The person with two talents moved out in another direction. However, the person with one talent moved downward. He dug a hole and buried his master's money in the ground. Fear caused him to lose his sense of direction. How many times have you heard people say they aspire to reach certain goals. There are certain things in this life they'd like to achieve. "But," they say, "if I go in this direction it might not work out. If I try my hand in this area I might meet with failure? Or, if I take out in another direction I might be humiliated." So, because of fear they lose all sense of direction and end up going nowhere.

Sometimes what we fear shows up in our lives as a loss of verve and vitality. Our get up and go has gotten up and gone. There is no fire in the belly, there is no can-do spirit. We find ourselves stuck in a rut unable to move in any direction. The great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson used to sing a song that said in part: "Standing here wandering which way to go..." So oft times when we lose our zeal and zest for life we find ourselves standing at the crossroads wondering which way to go. We feel like each time we try to move forward the dead hand of the past slaps us back.

Sometimes that which we fear shows up in our lives as an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. We say to God, "God, when I look around and see how you have blessed others. How much they have, how much they know, and where they have been, I really feel that you did not give me what I need to make it in this life." When we think such thoughts an overwhelming sense of inadequacy can overtake us.

While I do not have all of the answers to our fears, I do want to speak to the fear that keep us from using all that God has given us in this life. Fear can prevent us from putting to use what God has distinctly granted to us. There is not a person living to whom God has not given something. I suppose this person with one talent was doing alright until he remembered there was a person out there with two times as much. And I need not tell you what he said the day he remembered there was a person out there with five times as much.

Whenever we start to think of ourselves as little and insignificant we are headed down "mess up" road. You may not be able to sing like an angel and you may not be able to preach like Paul, but God has given you something to function with in this life. And God is looking to you to make your contribution to the human situation. Moreover, there is one thing no one can beat you doing: your best! When you have done your best that's all God requires.

Also, God never gives anything everything. You have only to look at nature to know this is true. Look at the peacock strutting and preening in full plumage. You could look at that proud bird and say, "My goodness, God gave

the peacock everything.” But just keep looking. Look past that sun crowned head. Look past that colorful tailspan. Look past that mighty strut and look down at those feet. Ah, you will see some of the dirtiest, rustiest, most scratched up feet ever. You will then say, “No, no, God did not give the peacock everything.” God always saves something for you and for me. God has given you something to function with in this life.

And may I say to you, we could come to such peace and contentment in life if we could convince ourselves that we are where we are supposed to be and we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. I am reminded here of a story where a man took his son to a parcel of land he owned and told him to chop down the weeds at the corner of the lot. While the little boy was chopping weeds he noticed that some businessmen scouting out land nearby for possible development had gotten confused about the best way to get back to the city. They yelled across the way to the little boy, “Hey kid, which road leads back to the city?” The little boy yelled out, “the city is that way.” Confused as to the location of the city himself, the boy yelled out once more, “Hey stop, I’m sorry, the city is the other way.” One of the businessmen said to the others in the group, “Let’s not trouble the little boy any further he is clearly lost.” The little boy replied, “No, I’m not lost. I’m where I’m supposed to be. My father told me to work this part of the field.” “But,” said the businessman, “You don’t even know how to get to the city.” The little boy said, “That’s because I’m not going to the city. But I’m not lost. I am where I’m supposed to be.” We, too, could come to such peace of mind if we could just recognize that we are where we are supposed to be and we are doing what we are supposed to be doing.

May I also say, that this person with one talent focused too much on what he did not have and not enough on what the master had given to him. He thought to himself that he wouldn’t mind working with one little talent if he just didn’t have to be around others who had been given so much. If he could be in a different environment, a different milieu he wouldn’t mind working with his limited talent. But this person with one talent was not being true to life. There will never come a time in life when all things are just like you’d like for them to be. If you are waiting for your life to be just right, you never will do anything with what God has given to you.

In this life we have to learn to play the hand that life deals us. We would all like a hand filled with jacks, kings, and queens. But the truth of the matter is that someone has to have some threes, fours, and fives. When you get a bad hand, learn how to keep a straight face. Take courage in the fact that the God you serve is in charge of the shuffle and while it may not be the hand you prefer, it is a playable hand. If you are here this morning and you have hidden your talent in the earth. Go and dig up your talent. Go now! Go at once! Go as you are! Go now

while it is still day. Go before the hour of judgment strikes. Go before the master returns. Go and use what God has given you! Use it to the glory of God, for the betterment of humankind, and for the upbuilding of the kingdom. Amen

## “FOLLOWING THE STAR”

*Psalm 41*

*Hebrews 12: 12-24*

*John 13: 21-30*

The Rev. Brent Norris, Rector  
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In the Gospel Jesus says to Judas: “Your star has led you astray.” No, you didn’t hear Jesus say that in the lesson we heard this evening from the Gospel according to John. That is because when Jesus says to Judas “Your star has led you astray” he is speaking in another Gospel, the Gospel According to Judas.

Back before the secular and ecclesiastical press became determined to whip us into a froth about the DaVinci Code, the intended subject of the froth whipping du jour was the newly re-discovered and released Gospel According to Judas, which after laying in oblivion for almost 1700 years, hit the front pages about Holy Week, proving once again that timing is everything.

The existence of this apocryphal gospel attributed to Judas was known in the early days of the Church. In the late 2nd century both Irenaeus and Origen denounced the work for its Gnostic content, because it taught that Judas of all the disciples was the only one who was truly enlightened and the only one who truly understood Jesus. Had Peter or Paul been the one with special knowledge perhaps the writing in question might have been better received. But it was none of the good and trustworthy disciples, it was instead Judas, the betrayer, and that just about made the conclusion foregone.

I have read the Gospel according to Judas. Have any of you? I have to say that I found it fairly innocuous. There really is not much in it except that I did like reading that Jesus laughed, which he does fairly often in this short book. And we do need more laughter. Other than that the Gospel according to Judas is the fairly typical Gnostic notebook of cryptic sayings and whispered conversations made apart from the rest of the group. I guess I am just not enlightened enough really to understand it. I’m obviously not in the “gno” sis. Ka-ching!

In the Gospel according to Judas, Judas has special knowledge about Jesus. He alone knows the mind of Jesus and I think it is possible that this truth, this special knowledge which Judas has, is the star which Jesus says leads Judas astray.

The Judas to whom we are introduced in the Bible is not an easy person to like. A friend of mine told me a few weeks ago, “No one ever went to Benedict Arnold Elementary School and no one ever named their kid Judas.” We have a prejudice about Judas that comes from the historical record we have received.

And for that I am sorry.

I wish we knew more of the un-filtered truth about Judas. What we know of him comes from the canonically accepted Gospels and from the book of Acts. All of which were written after Judas greeted his friend Jesus with that infamous kiss. It is not surprising therefore that every single scriptural reference to Judas is accented by a negative attribute such as:

Judas, who was the betrayer (Luke 6: 10)

Judas, who did not really care for the poor,

Judas, who kept the common purse, but stole from it (John 12: 6)

The Gospel writers, because of their experience, had special knowledge about Judas. One might imagine that as they write their accounts of the sacred story their wounds are still raw, the scorch of Judas' betrayal still so hot that it burns and colors their words. Still, there is in their accounts a certain moral certitude about what Judas had done that I find un-Christian. They have their knowledge. They have the truth as they see it. Evidently, Judas does not have a corner on either of those markets.

I wonder what they would have said about him if any of them had written their accounts of the life of Jesus before Judas's act of betrayal. Would we have had any kinder words for Judas?

Perhaps so. After all Jesus called Judas to be one of the twelve, and while prescient words can be put conveniently into Jesus' mouth after the fact, I just cannot seriously accept a Jesus who, looking at Judas at their first meeting says, "O yes, hello there Judas. I choose you to be one of my twelve closest friends. And by the way, on the 14th day of Nisan year after next I will need to you betray me with a kiss while I pray in the Garden of Gethsemane."

Jesus called Judas to be one of his disciples and for a while Judas followed. Presumably Judas was one of those whom Jesus sent out two by two to heal the sick and proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. That says something about Judas. And it says something about what Jesus thought of Judas. Something positive, something worth holding on to. But at some point something happened. What was that? What star was it that appeared on Judas' horizon that led him astray?

The canonical Evangelists say essentially that the "Devil" made him do it, as if that would make his act of betrayal a little more palatable. It certainly is a convenient excuse. If the act of betrayal wasn't an act of Judas' free will how then can he be judged for it? How can he be held accountable? No, Judas is responsible for his own actions, just like everyone else is.

Down through the centuries various theories have been proposed for his infamous act of betrayal. Some say that he was simply greedy and seeking to

make a quick 30 in coinage. Others suggest that Judas had grown disillusioned with the Master and his message. Still others suggest that perhaps Judas was simply trying to force Jesus into stepping up to be the Messiah that Judas wanted him to be. And that is the explanation that makes the most sense to me.

I think that Judas has some fairly specific ideas of what the Messiah will do and be. And I think that Judas has hitched his wagon to Jesus' star only to find that the star of his expectations and the star of Jesus are not in alignment. So, Judas tries to force Jesus into being the kind of Messiah he has always wished for. And to make that happen, Judas tries to force Jesus into action. Judas tries to force Jesus into being the Messiah that he has imagined by betraying him --by placing Jesus in a situation where he will finally live up to Judas' expectations. Yes, of all the possible reasons for Judas' betrayal that is the one that I find most likely to be the star which led Judas astray. Why do I find that most likely?

Because sometimes I have been led astray by that same star. I, like Judas, am easy to lead astray, especially by bright sparkly stars created from the white hot burn of my own passions.

I have my own special knowledge, my own deeply held thoughts and beliefs about all kinds of things, including what kind of Messiah Jesus should be. I can be pretty dogmatic about what the Church Jesus founded should do about this or that, because I believe that I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt what Jesus thinks. I have special knowledge and insight into Jesus. Why, on any given question I can pretty much tell you What Jesus Would Do without looking at the bracelet. I am convinced of my knowledge of Jesus and his truth. And perhaps you have some special knowledge too.

By the very nature of our common calling to ministry and especially to the ordained ministry, we are people who care about things. We are people who are called to preach the Word earnestly. Being urgent in and out of season. We care deeply. We get energized about our convictions, and rightly so. But sometimes, sometimes, when we do care deeply about something, when we really care deeply about something, when we have really fixed our hopes on something, we become determined to make Jesus agree with us. The light of our own passions gets in our eyes and when we wish upon our star we forget to see if our star is aligned with Christ's and in that whole process the star of our passions sometimes leads us astray.

There is an old blessing of unknown origin which says. "May you live in interesting times." There is a corollary curse which says: "May you live in interesting times." Whether blessing or curse that is where we find ourselves.

The past few years in the life of our part of Christ's Church have been interesting times. The week to come, as the 75th General Convention meets in Columbus will be interesting too. Whether we want it to be or not. And in all of

this there has been more than enough froth whipping to go around. Those who are writing and recording and blogging the events in this part of our sacred story have begun to identify the Judases among us, their wounds being raw, their words are colored by the heat of the moment those words are often judgmental and uncharitable. And if we would, in turn, shine the light on our own actions it is perhaps true that each of us has been tempted to identify a Judas or Judases of our own choosing from among the characters active in this part of the story. We make that choice based on our convictions, convictions that are forged by our special knowledge and our unique truth. There is still no corner on that market.

Oh, do not get me wrong. I believe that Judas is still among us. I tell you I have actually seen him. The last time I saw him his face was reflected in the garnet liquid mirror on the inside of a chalice. When I see him he has brown eyes and beard. Perhaps you have seen him, too. How would you describe what Judas looked like?

In these interesting times there is no shortage of well meaning, thoughtful, dedicated people who truly believe that they know beyond a shadow of a doubt what Jesus wants. Special knowledge abounds in this new Gnostic age.

There are many truths and much knowledge and they shine not as single stars but as whole constellations of human made wishing stars launched into orbit in the Creator's sky.

But, remember those are not the Creators stars. The Creator has but one star, the one whom we describe in the Easter liturgy as the "Morning star who knows no setting." He is the star who is the light of the world. He is the star who fell to earth and was caught by the Maid of Nazareth, who shifted his brilliance so that could look at him. He is the true star in whose light all of our stars must fade. He is the star we must follow if we set our sights on his light and his light alone. He will lead us in these interesting times, not into stray stary paths of betrayal and unfaithfulness but up the path which leads to all Truth.

## **“MY, HOW YOU’VE CHANGED!”**

*Acts 4:5-12*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy J. Mulder  
at the Marble Collegiate Church, New York  
July 30, 2006

This past Mother’s Day, my brother and I had the pleasure of going back to the church with our mother where we had spent part of our childhood. “My, how you’ve changed!” exclaimed some of the folk who had been there all those years ago. That statement was true on many levels, not simply the obvious height, weight and graying of hair. Their comments brought memories of good times, but also some times I suppose I would have preferred to have forgotten.

Such as back then, when I was 14, I was part of a group. (We didn’t call them gangs in north Jersey.) There was Rich, Steve, Stephen, Andy and myself. We did everything together, from sing in the choir to sneak our first cigarettes. Like most teens, we were obsessed with how we thought we appeared to other people. One day, with our inflated self-images, we decided that Steve wasn’t as good looking as the rest of us. He was gangly and had too many pimples. His old clothes didn’t look quite right. He was not good for the image we wanted.

So one afternoon we huddled to see which of us would tell Steve we did not want to be his friend any more. You can guess who drew the short straw.

The next day, I delivered the message...then watched as tears filled his eyes and he struggled to understand what his ears were hearing. As I watched him run away in pain, I wondered why I wasn’t feeling better. After all, I had done it, that which we had thought would improve our status so. But as I walked back to the group, I knew the truth. I had done a terrible thing.

Two weeks went by and I couldn’t take it any longer. I found Steve and blurted out, “I am so sorry. Will you forgive me?” Silence – as he stared into my eyes and the muscles in his face grow hard. It was a long, long time before he replied with a single word: “No.”

It was a hard lesson to learn. Forgiveness isn’t automatic. It isn’t required. It doesn’t always come easy. In his amazing book, *The Sundflower*, Simon Wiesenthal tells the story of a brutal guard in a concentration camp who contracts cancer and calls one of the camp’s prisoners to see him on his death bed. He begs the prisoner to forgive him for all the people he has been so cruel to so that he can die in peace. In reply the prisoner keeps silence. He doesn’t say yes, but he doesn’t say no. But in the closing sentence of the story the prisoner asks all the readers of this book, “What would you have done?” And then the incredible thing is that the author of the story, Simon Wiesenthal wrote to over forty people to ask them to

respond to that question, and that comprises the second half of the book.

One person writes, "I would only do it if it made me feel good. That's the only reason to forgive anyone. Forgiveness is an emotional, psychologically activity. It should simply be a matter of if you want to or not." Another person said, "In my tradition, only the victim can forgive a wrong that has been done to him. No one can ask for forgiveness for all of his wrongs to scores of people from one person and expect that person has the right or power to forgive. It is a matter of justice, and justice needs to be for the specifically offended by the specific offender.

And then there was Desmond Tutu's description of some of the victims of torture and murder during the years of apartheid, and yet how some were able to forgive the perpetrators. Tutu said he felt like taking off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground in the presence of such people. But he went on to say, "if we look only for justice, for retribution, then we might just as well close up shop... Without forgiveness, there is no future."

I learned that day long ago from Steve that forgiveness is not an automatic thing, but when it does come your way, here is my question, "What difference does it make to you?" What difference does it make if you are forgiven or not?

Once upon a time there were two men – good men, men of good intentions and fine dreams and hopes. Imagine both as little boys growing up, learning fish with their dads and to pray with their moms. Imagine one of them growing up with a wonderful sense of justice and desire for freedom for his people. Imagine him meeting Jesus and thinking that here was a man he would work with side by side to accomplish wonderful things. Imagine the other having far less social consciousness, but still being so attracted to Jesus that he would leave his occupation to follow this spiritual guide.

Then on the same night, despite all that was so good in both of them, one went up to Jesus and kissed him in a way that betrayed him to death, while the other stood at a fire in a courtyard and proclaimed "I do not know the man," who was the best friend he had ever had.

They both betrayed Jesus! They hadn't intended for their lives to come to this. They were not born as betrayers. They were not raised hoping to do this, to be this kind of person. But it happened; they did those terrible things - one betrayal not any worse than the other in my book. Peter was no better than Judas.

But then, what was the difference between these two? One of them went off and splattered his guts in a field that is cursed to this day, while the other became so brave that he could stand before a hostile religious court and testify that Jesus crucified and risen was the Christ by which all mortals might be saved.

Somehow Peter accepted the message of God's mercy. I believe that it was mercy that changed Peter. After Easter Peter met the risen Lord, and what

did Christ say to him? “Peter, you betrayed me when I needed you most. I don’t want to see you now? No, the risen Christ, looked at Peter, and it’s as though he said, “My, how you can change! I forgive you. The question is, can you accept that? What difference does it make to you, in you?”

Peter had to accept deep within his heart that there is, as Bill Coffin once said, more mercy in God than there was sin in him. The Gospel happens when you can accept that, “There is nothing you can do that will make God love you any more. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you any less. The Good News of Jesus is that God simply, completely and for always loves you.” Peter heard Jesus saying, “No matter what you have done, it is not forgiven and gone, gone completely. Now change, and go and live with power.”

Irenaeus once said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Peter discovered courage for living.

In accepting God’s mercy for himself, not only for the terrible time when he had denied his friend in the courtyard, but for all the other times when he had not, nor in the future might not, live up to what he could or should or really wanted to be or do, Peter found an inner Peace that the world with its judgments and criticism and systems and attitudes could never give. And with that peace came the courage to live.

Peter changed to become better than he had ever dreamed he could be because God’s mercy became the power to energize his life.

Do you remember to movie, “As Good as it Gets” in which Jack Nicholson plays one of the most self-absorbed, indifferent to other people, paranoid about almost everything in life, characters you can imagine? He gradually realizes that he is coming to care for a plain waitress at the local diner who has so many problems of her own that at first she doesn’t realize, and then can’t truly imagine what is happening. The highlight of the movie comes when they go out to dinner and he leans over the table and says, “You make me want to be a better man.”

Mercy is God’s offer to put the past behind and become a better person: to hurt more, perhaps for people, things, causes, but to love deeper and more broadly, to judge others less, to dream more. Accepting God’s mercy made all the difference between Judas and Peter.

What difference does it make to you?

## **A SERMON PREACHED**

at the Thanksgiving Eucharist for the Life of  
the Reverend Canon Clinton R. Jones  
at Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford, Conn. on June 7, 2006  
by the Reverend William A. Doubleday,  
Professor of Pastoral Theology, Bexley Hall Seminary

(Editor's note: Dr. Doubleday was scheduled to have been on the staff of this summer's PEP, but the death of his friend and mentor called him away and to preach the following.)

In the name of the Living God, who Creates, Redeems, and Inspires us.  
AMEN.

A charter oak has been plucked from Connecticut's ecclesiastical forest. Though small in physical stature, he stood tall in so many of our lives. He was a steady and ever faithful source of compassion, inspiration, and unconditional love.

Canon Jones might well say that he has now journeyed to a better place, but we know that we are better people in better places in our lives and faith because he journeyed in our midst for so long. His quiet, unassuming ministries over more than sixty five years have had an impact on this Cathedral, on this community, and on individual lives in ways which surpass the memory or the imagination of any of us. For some of us he brought acceptance and inclusion. To others of us he offered enlightenment and education. With many of us, he worked for justice and compassion for all sorts and conditions of men, women, and children, not only in this place, but across this land and around this fragile globe.

Canon Jones well understood that at the core of Christian community is the need for trustworthy pastoral care at the wonder moments and in the crises of our lives. His life and ministry were punctuated by baptisms, weddings. And countless visits to hospitals, prisons, and homes, as well as innumerable funerals and burials, yes, truly, innumerable funerals and burials! To each he brought a listening ear, a wise word, and invariably the unconditional Love of God. But pastoral care in and of itself was not enough. Canon Jones also possessed a passion for justice which knew no bounds. He gently pressed us all to throw open the doors of our churches and the doors of our hearts to all who would come in. His almost Victorian manners and his gracious and unassuming ways sometimes blinded us to the almost revolutionary transformative work of the Gospel he was often

undertaking.

Canon Jones thoroughly grasped the words of the Prophets and the social implications of the Gospel. The words of Isaiah 61 were almost like his job description: "Bringing good news to the oppressed; binding up the brokenhearted; proclaiming liberty to captives; proclaiming release for prisoners; comforting those who mourn." Often, the good news was that in the process of his ministry, many of us were inspired to be about that prophetic work as well.

Canon Jones was an avid reader and an earnest scholar all of his life. His personal theological library did not close down when he graduated from The General Theological Seminary in 1941. He wrestled regularly with the Scriptures, and often with St. Paul, in particular. But like St. Paul in Romans 8, he early on concluded that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Over time, Canon Jones came to press that message even further and more clearly than St. Paul had done:

**NOTHING COULD SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD:**

Not wealth, or poverty, or homelessness;

Not immigration or assimilation;

Not gender dysphoria or a sex change operation;

Not mental illness, physical disability, or some kind of addiction;

Not being imprisoned or being on parole;

Not having a troubled adolescence or an unruly senile dementia;

Not being married, single, celibate, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transvestite, or transsexual;

Not being White, or Black, or Asian, or Hispanic, or Native American.

In his view, all the walls which separate or exclude any of us from the Love of God needed to come tumbling down. The challenge then became how we all could learn to live together - all of us - in communities marked by Justice, Love, and Peace? Ultimately, the question becomes: Will our neighbors know we are Christians by our Love?

Canon Jones was a priest and a pastor inspired by the Biblical image of the Good Shepherd, both in Ezekiel and in the passage we heard from John 10. He understood full well that in the final analysis only God or Jesus himself is truly the Good Shepherd of the flock. The rest of us are at best poor imitations -

perhaps more like sheep dogs than shepherds. We really do endeavor to carry out the shepherd's work, but often that means barking, running in circles, and attending committee meetings. Nonetheless, the flock the congregation - needs the best that we can offer. Members of the flock need to be recognized, called by name, and attended in appropriate ways in times of need or crisis. At times we all need protection from one or another of the wolves of this world. Some of us have been wounded already by the neglect or abuse of the hired hands who were meant to be our shepherds. Canon Jones' vision and hope were that each and every one of us in this motley flock called the Church, might yet find welcome, safety, hospitality nurture, rest for our souls, and the inspiration to live into the full implications of our Baptismal Vows.

Finally, let me speak in a somewhat more personal and even slightly polemical way. We hear much in our culture about "traditional family values." It is a phrase which we all need to take back and make our own. In a sense much of Canon Clinton Jones' life and ministry was about just that.

We are a nation, and sometimes a Church, which has somehow lost its manners, but Canon Jones never lost his. Perhaps we all need to reclaim them. He endeavored always to offer hospitality to friends, neighbors, enemies, and strangers. He knew that sometimes he was entertaining angels unaware. Some of his dinner parties were legend!

He valued family greatly. As the only child in his family to survive infancy, he cherished his artistic mother who died young; his father who struggled to continue farming in the depression; his gracious stepmother, his aunt; his beloved cousins and their children and grandchildren. He loved Mrs. Conlon, with whom he shared a home for many years, as well as her extended family. He treasured the many young men who found shelter and safe haven under his roof. He was devoted to his beloved partner, Kenneth, with whom he shared more than 40 years of love and care; to his dear friend Carol, who has shared their home for many years; and to so many others of us who came to feel a part of that family, too.

I've often said that had he not been Canon Jones, he could just as well have been Uncle Clinton, a steady, loving, and supportive avuncular presence in our lives. In a strange and wonderful way, he came to embody FAMIL Y, often for those who had none to welcome them home.

He also valued institutions, with a deep sense of gratitude. His loyalty to Bard College and to The General Theological Seminary knew no bounds. They

had enriched his life and prepared him for ministry and he never stopped saying thank you in tangible ways.

Indeed, gratitude was one of those traditional values that Canon Jones honored to the very end. A meal never began without a grace. A day never ended without a prayer. An act of kindness or hospitality never went without a thank you note. That sense of gratitude radiated throughout his life - in his preaching - at the altar for the Eucharist and in all of his personal relationships.

Each of us has stories to tell on this day when we remember and give thanks for the life of Canon Clinton Jones. There will be time over lunch and in the days and months ahead for each of us to share those stories - they are blessings we will carry forward in our lives and ministries - even as we carry Canon Jones in our hearts and in our prayers.

When I was given this assignment some years ago, Canon Jones gave me two instructions: "No eulogy and don't wave your arms."

Well Canon Jones, at least I tried to keep my arms still.

May the souls of the departed rest in Peace. Amen.