

St. James' E-pistle

January 17, 2014

Pulpit Notes

Brothers and Sisters:

As I mentioned at the beginning of the year, one of my resolutions was to spend one day a month at Holy Cross Monastery, a practice I had once held sacred but in recent years let slip. Well, yesterday I did it. I spent the day with the brothers and other guests, and it was good.

What do you do at a monastery all day? Let me give you a quick rundown. First, I arrived a little after 8:00. There is morning prayer (matins) at 7:30, but with getting the family off to work and school, that wasn't realistic for us. So 8:00 it was. I settled into a nice cozy corner in the main reading room and started reading a book I had brought, "The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus," by Peter Gomes.

Within an hour, however, it was time for Holy Communion. There were about fourteen brothers there (including two novices and an aspirant) as well as maybe twenty guests. It was good to pass the peace, especially since I hadn't seen some of the brothers in awhile. One had just returned from a couple of years serving in their South African house and school. While many of the brothers are newer, I've known some of them for more than twenty years. You would like a monastery eucharist for its simplicity and intimacy.

Then it was back to my little corner where I read and took pages of notes. I love a book that makes me stop every few minutes to either write down a quote or my thoughts. It makes for slow reading but great reflection. I read until noon when the bell chimed to let us know it was time for diurnum (noonday prayer). This service is marked by a prayer, a sung hymn (a cappella), a chanted psalm and a very long silence. When you first encounter this silence, it makes you squirm with discomfort (at least it did for me), but then you learn to love it. As for the psalm, you can quickly learn the chant, and guests are welcome to quietly chant along, but it is really the brothers who do this.

We then ate lunch monastery style. That means that the food (very good!) is eaten in silence while one of the brothers reads a passage from a book. This time it was Kathleen Norris's "Amazing Grace." Halfway through the meal, the brother stops reading, and guests are allowed to speak. I sat with a group which happened to be staff of the Philadelphia Cathedral. They had decided a staff retreat was necessary, and I have to say, they loved it at Holy Cross!

Following lunch, I had a talk with the superior of the order, Brother Robert Sevensky. Then I took a quick walk to the river to look at the ice flowing south and returned to my reading corner where switched to reading from "My First Coup D'état," by Ghanaian president, John

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Mahama. Last month, I prayed the invocation at a function involving several Ghanaian diplomats and was given the book. I'm finding it engaging and moving.

Around 4:00 pm., I took a break from reading and spent time writing. Not only notes from what I had learned in my reading but my own prayers and ideas for making St. James' a better place for encountering God and confronting our own demons. At 5:00 pm., the bell tolled again for Vespers. At the end of this service, the brothers tolled the bell for an inmate in Texas who was to be executed that night. It is the practice of the monastery (and religious institutions of many faiths around the country) to toll their bells whenever anyone in this country is executed. They pray for the condemned, their victims and the executioners.

And then it was time to leave.

A day like yesterday serves several functions. It lets me catch up on religious reading (and yes, I made time for scripture reading, too), it allows me to worship much more intently than the usual schedule allows, and it gives me a framework for lifting you all up in my prayers. It was an important part of my day, in fact, praying for St. James' and its members.

If anything took me by surprise, it was the discomfort I found in leaving my phone and iPad in the car. I wasn't able to leave them home, and I admit to checking for messages after lunch, but for the most part I was unplugged. That, in itself, is an experience worth having. We forget what it means to really be alone with God. This is a way to do it.

And the cost? All day, great food, comfortable setting, brothers to talk to if desired - \$10, plus a couple of bucks I threw in for all the coffee I drank throughout the day. Sound good? This experience is not reserved to clergy - it's open to anyone. Maybe you.

In Christ,

Chuck+

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The News of the Diocese

Link Parish? The Diocese of New York is linking some of its parishes with parishes in the Diocese of London and wants to know if we are interested in being one of those parishes. While the expectations of linking are flexible, they are sure to include a parish contact person and real attempts to be involved with the life of the link parish. If this sounds interesting to you – i.e., something you would like to take a leading role in - please contact me as soon as possible. We must let Archdeacon Parnell know by January 23 at the latest.

The News of the Church

Fireside Chats: The Fireside Chat Series begins this month on **Thursday, January 16th** at 7:00 PM. The first session, titled, "Chattel: The Building of New York State" is given by Lorraine Roberts, retired educator and chairwoman of the Black History Project Committee and member of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project. A reception will follow.

Annual Meeting Notice: The annual meeting of St. James' Church, Hyde Park will take place on **Sunday, January 26th**, beginning with Holy Eucharist at 9:00 AM with the polls for Vestry open. All communicants in good standing of the parish (members who have received communion at least three times in the past year and are regular in giving for the ministry of the gospel), are eligible to vote.

There will be a light breakfast as well as the awarding of the St. James' Medal.

Acolytes training & schedule: An acolyte training session will take place on **Sunday, February 2nd following the 10:00 AM service.** All acolytes, new and old, are expected to attend (everyone needs a refresher now and then - consider it continuing education). This is especially important for those who are new or who are ready to make the leap from torch to crucifer. We will also discuss the function of a thurifer.

Boy Scout Sunday: **Sunday, February 2nd** is "Boy Scout Sunday". Scouts from Troop 80 will attend services on that day in uniform. They will also host Coffee Hour. All Boy Scouts, especially Eagle Scouts, are also welcome to come in uniform.

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Looking for Bible Study Participants: If you want to take a deeper look at or faith's foundational writings, if you want to ask questions about those uncomfortable and incomprehensible passages, if you enjoy spending time with others, our bible study wants you! We have been meeting Thursdays at 10 AM, but are willing to consider other times that accommodate today's hectic schedules. If you're interested, please contact either Fr. Chuck or Barbara Slegel. Hope to see you there - and bring a friend!

Notice of Inquirers classes: Bishop Dietsche will visit St. James' on December 14, 2014. He will confirm, receive and reaffirm the faith of all who seek it. To be confirmed or received into the Episcopal Church, you need to participate in the Inquirer's Series of classes. If you have not already done so, please see Fr. Chuck about registering for the classes. You have to be at least 13 to participate, and anyone under 16 must come to Fr. Chuck personally (their parents cannot speak for them) to discuss why they want to be confirmed.

Please keep the following people in your prayers:

Janet Arms, Ruth Blanding, John Bohlmann, Kathleen Craft, Michael Day, Jane Gagliardoto, Kasey Gaulin, Jack Gordy, Andy Hall, Harold Hall, Jolanda Heijenbrok, Brooke Helton, Rev. Don Hoger, Barbara Knakal, Rosemary Leuken, Andrew Mendelson, Rev. Tim Millard, Clifford Plass, Gerald Plass, Deborah Porach, Don Renten, John Robinson, John Schroeder, Marty Schroeder, Richard Secor, James Sheeky, Naomi Sleight, Debbie Stone, Gloria Veach, Candace Vincent, Cassidy Way and Cliff Wells.

Schedules

A Note about Schedules: The names you see below are those listed on their respective schedules. There are often times when, due to sickness or travel, substitutes are asked to fill in or trade positions. This will probably NOT be reflected in the lists below—so, if there is an inconsistency between what you see here and what you see on Sunday, that is alright.

Birthdays: Andrew Glancey, Ryan Seagren, Christopher Granados-Kramer, Kendall Whitman and Jodi Triola

Acolytes: January 19: Gage Minter, Jasmine Thatcher and Charlie Urban-Mead
January 26: Mike Minter, Nancy Montero, Skye O'Halloran and Monica Rizzo

Altar Guild: January 19: Team II

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8 a.m. Readers:	January 26: Team III January 19: Angela Henry and Paul Littlefield January 26: Debbie Belding and Grant Ferris
10 a.m. Readers:	January 19: Russell Urban-Mead/Justin Bohlmann January 26: Patty Caswell/Sophie Ciferri
Ushers:	January 19: Nancy Montero and Anna Marie Pitcher January 26: Kathie Champion and Mary Gabel
Pledge Clerks:	January 19: Tanya Hall and Anna Marie Pitcher January 26: Paul Littlefield and Dean Caswell
Coffee Hour Hosts:	January 19: Dierdre Mae Micker and The Gausepohls January 26: Annual Meeting and Breakfast

This Week's Lectionary

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

Sermon Preached on
First Sunday after the Epiphany
(January 12, 2014)

"Baptism: Before and After"

You know those ads you see where they show before and after pictures? There was one for some tooth whitening strips and they showed a woman with dull, dreary teeth in the before picture. You could tell how unhappy it made her because of the dark background, her frumpy clothes and the frown on her face. The after picture displaying her nice bright teeth was punctuated by her new make-up (and maybe a little airbrushing), a bright, cheery background, snappy clothes, and, of course, her broad smile.

That's advertising--you can't always trust the before and after, can you? And yet, sometimes you look at the changes that take place in people or places, and they are stunning.

Then again, with things like baptism, you might not be so sure what the differences are. But we should think about that not only because today is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ but because

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baptism itself has a before and after. Three of them, in fact. Baptism before Christ and after Christ, Christ before baptism and after baptism, AND you before baptism and after baptism.

Now, baptism as we know it did not exist per se in Jesus' time. But it did exist. People came to John the Baptist knowing what he was doing. Very quickly, ritual cleansing of sins was an ancient practice known in many religions. It had been practiced in Judaism for centuries. Over time, it took on an expanded role, serving as an initiation rite for converts, something adults men did after circumcision, and adult women did instead of. Furthermore, a Jewish religious community known today simply as the Qumran community practiced a form of baptism for those who wanted to become one of them. Their Manual of Discipline required that new admissions be sprinkled with water and then they "shall go into the wilderness to prepare there the way of Him; as it is written, Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a path for our God."

I mention them because many scholars believe John the Baptist was a member of this community, and these words were words he used.

Anyway, after Christ, we know that baptism changed. No longer was it a repeatable cleansing. It was once for all. No longer was it just to join a group or a religion, although it is that. Now it is a sign that we are adopted by God as God's children. The forms of baptism have changed, as have some beliefs about what happens to us, but seeing it as a sign of God's endless parental love for us has not.

For Jesus, there was another before and after. For him, before baptism, He was unknown and unburdened. He was not the rabbi, the teacher, the master or the Messiah as far as anyone knew. Yes, he was already the Son of God, which is why when John balked at baptizing Jesus. But Jesus knew he had a choice to stay the same or to change everything, so he said, "Let it be so for now so that all righteousness may be fulfilled."

After baptism, Jesus was different. He was still the eternal Son of God just as before, but now he had committed himself publicly. He had made himself known. The Spirit descending on him was the sign that Jesus was changed, and being driven out into the wilderness for forty days of fasting immediately afterward was the next step - a complete break with the life he had lived up to that point. This was the start of his ministry, and from this point on, he was the teacher, the feeder of masses, the healer, and the raiser of the dead, the reconciler.

And then there's us. You and me. With us, there is also a before and after in baptism. It doesn't matter if we were immersed or sprinkled, we are changed. Not because any magic took place in the ritual but because in baptism, you or your family publicly acknowledged yourself to be a child of God, and the church - the family - publicly took you on as a sibling. It was an adoption ceremony, if you want to call it that. The church calls it a sacrament, and outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace - I often describe baptism as being like that first kiss, a

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physical act to show your already growing love. You may not look different, but you will never be the same.

What changes in you with baptism? In the early church, there was usually total immersion in running water. In some traditions, you were stripped of all your old clothes, baptized naked and then clothed in a white robe to show that your life before Christ was over, and a new life had begun.

In our church, we acknowledge that you are not only a member of the family but a minister, a member of the priesthood of Christ. In our catechism, the Baptized are listed as the first and primary ministers of the church. If the baptized are not doing their ministry, the church fails. The clergy merely assist your ministry even as we seek to live out OUR baptisms.

In baptism we are changed in our view and mission. We are called in the baptismal rite to seek and serve Christ in all people, to seek justice for all people, to reject the evil powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, to forgive others and accept forgiveness, to follow Christ and proclaim him as Lord.

We publicly take on this mission because it's who we are as God's children. We are not the same people we were before baptism. We are changed, different.

Or are we?

Remember those doctored before and after ads? Lots of smoke and mirrors - or make up and computer graphics. There might have been some change...or it might have been all a lie. Often, with baptism, it's hard to tell as well.

Do we go through the ritual because it's expected of us? Because it'll keep grandma & grandpa happy? Because we're afraid of what people will think? Do we do it and then go away unchanged?

Or is it truly a first kiss? A physical act of adoption in which we join a ministry that both feeds us and builds in us the desire and skill to feed the world in body and soul.

For Jesus, baptism changed everything. Through Jesus, baptism changed forever. For us, through Jesus, baptism can do the same. But only if we choose. Amen.