

St. James' E-pistle

July 3, 2014

Pulpit Notes

Brothers and Sisters:

Happy 4th of July! I'm trying to get this out to you a little early so you can enjoy it before the big festivities.

Despite the US's hard-fought loss in the World Cup (I'm a new Tim Howard fan), I hope your holiday weekend is joyful and safe. If you're in town, be sure to take in the parade - our Community Garden is marching!

On the topic of US independence, you may be interested to know that our "Founding Father" Samuel Bard, his father, was a firm Loyalist during the Revolution, quietly faithful to the king. His brother, John, however, went to Georgia to fight on the side of the Americans.

I would have liked to be a fly on the wall at their family reunion after the Revolution, especially since John spent time as a prisoner of war. Somehow, however, the Bards and many families like them - divided in war - managed to find their deeper common bonds. In the end, they were family.

Have you noticed that we often feel like a divided country these days? Some of us are loudly on the far right, others loudly on the far left. Most quietly - even timidly - somewhere in between. Maybe social media like, Facebook and Twitter, joining the old standbys of talk radio and TV pundits, have increased the volume. Nevertheless, you can feel the tension.

That came to a head this week with the Supreme Court's decision in the Hobby Lobby case. I will not give an opinion on the case but rather a reminder that our country is built on neighbors and often families disagreeing vehemently on countless issues from politics to economics to climate change to religion and yes, even sports. From our earliest days, we have been a divided country even to the point of taking up arms against each other. Frankly, if we can limit our vitriol to social media, I'll consider that a step forward.

To better move forward, however, we might do well to look back to our parish's first family. They did not let even a war get between them, and by making their love for each other stronger even than war, they serve as an example.

We are a parish family, built on a common love in Jesus Christ. Through Christ we know that God's love for each of us is stronger than any horror we can imagine. You and I are bound to each other not only in this life but in the next. As we move forward in a political climate that is unlikely to become serene in our lifetimes, let's remember that bond.

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Oh, and despite that loss in the World Cup, the US team did something amazing. It brought more Americans together to cheer - all around the country, in parks, stadiums, bars, homes - than any sporting event in US history. That's new. Even after the final whistle, the fans applauded in appreciation, and commentators felt that for the first time, American fans of "the beautiful game," the international sport, were hooked.

That's not nearly as good as the bond of Christ's love, mind you, but anything that helps us unite not just as a nation but as fellow human beings can't be all bad.

So enjoy your holiday weekend! But in doing so, remember that we are all together in this world. Always.

In Christ,

Chuck+

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The News of the Diocese

Still Pray for Nigerian Terror Victims: Please consider using this prayer in your daily devotions as you remember the more than 200 girls kidnapped in Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram. While it is true that there are millions in equally desperate situations and facing equally unjust treatment, focusing on one specific case of injustice and evil may help us remember all who suffer similarly. (This prayer comes by way of the Rev. Steve Holton for the Episcopal Muslim Relations Committee).

Prayer for the kidnapped Nigerian girls May 2014

O God, we cry out to you
for the lives and the freedom
of the 276 kidnapped girls in Nigeria.
In their time of danger and fear,
pour out your strong Spirit for them.
Make a way home for them in safety.
Make a way back for them
to the education that will lift them up.
Hold them in the knowledge
that they are not captive slaves,
they are not purchased brides,
but they are your beloved daughters,
and precious in your sight.
Change the hearts and minds of their kidnappers
and of all who choose violence against women and girls.
Cast down the mighty from their seat,
and lift up the humble and meek,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Diocesan Cycle of Prayer: Please pray for these diocesan ministries this week. If you want to check out the entire year's calendar for intercession, it's simple to find - go to <http://www.diocesen.org> and click under "Beliefs and Practices."

- 6** The Church of the Transfiguration, Manhattan
- 7** St. Ann's Church, The Bronx
- 8** Trinity Church, The Bronx
- 9** St. Mary's Church in the Highlands, Cold Spring on Hudson

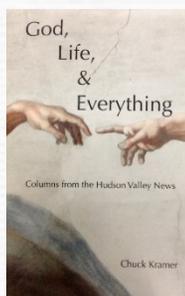
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- 10 Christ Church of Ramapo, Suffern
- 11 The Church of the Good Shepherd, Granite Springs
- 12 The Church of Sts. John, Paul & Clement, Mount Vernon

Children's Community Chorus: St. Margaret's Church in Staatsburg is inviting all children between the ages of 8 and 13 to join their free, non-denominational Children's Community Chorus. St. Margaret's received a grant to form this group which is not only a singing group but a class intent on teaching all children how to read music. The idea is for the chorus to sing at various community concerts as well as once a month during St. Margaret's worship. If you would like more information, please call Fr. Allan Ford at 914-299-3148 or leave a message at 845-889-4181.

The News of the Church



Book Now On Sale: Fr. Chuck's book, "God, Life, and Everything" is now available for purchase! It will be in the parish hall after church at a cost of \$12.95. (plus \$1.05 tax). Checks should be made out to "The Hudson Valley News." Come on over to coffee hour and meet the author! He will be happy to autograph it if you wish. ;-)

DEADLINE for Rail Trail Pilgrimage: The deadline is approaching to register for the Rail Trail Pilgrimage (September 13-14). **In order to participate, you must register by August 10.** We start in Hopewell Junction and end at in the Town of Lloyd, spending the night at St. Andrew's Church in Poughkeepsie. Last Spring it was a spiritual powerhouse. There is a non-refundable \$15 deposit required to hold your spot (refundable only if we have to cancel). Because of the difficulty in finding supply clergy, this deadline cannot be changed.

ACTORS! Auditions Being Held for Graveyard Tours: Auditions have been set for roles in this year's Graveyard Tours. A closed audition - for parishioners only - is Tuesday, July 8 at 7:00 PM at the Chapel. The second audition, is Tuesday, July 15, also at 7:00 and also at the Chapel. There are seven dates for tours: October 4, 10, 11, 17, 18, 24, and 31. The goal is to have two actors for every role. If you would like to act, please contact director Andrew Burgreen at jabjen@juno.com.

Wanted: New Acolytes: As the school year draws to an end, we will say goodbye to our graduating acolytes (and wish them luck in college!). This opens up a couple of spots on the

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acolyte list, and we want you! New acolytes need to be at least 9 years old and willing to be trained. Please see me (Fr. Chuck).

Tree Stand For Free: Need a Christmas Tree stand for a large tree? Deirdre Mae Micker is moving and needs to reduce, so she has just such a stand for the first taker. Just give her a yell!

Survey Participants Wanted: Boston University School of Theology is doing a study of adults who have come to faith - or a renewed faith - in the last three years. The school has reached out to churches across the country including our own. I have been on their web site to see if the survey is legitimate, and I am satisfied that it is. If you fit the description below and are interested, please read their statement below.

"We would like to offer the survey to adults in your congregation (aged 18 and over) who have made a new religious commitment, conversion, or profession of faith within the last three years (since January 1, 2011), even if that happens to be a "return" to faith from an earlier commitment in their lives. We are relying on clergy such as you to forward the online link to that survey (www.bu.edu/cpt/fft) to those individuals in your congregation who fall into that category. In most cases, you would be the one who best knows who they are. All responses will be kept completely anonymous and confidential. We also have hard copies that I can send you in most major languages for those who prefer not to take the survey online or who are unable to do so. If you will let me know by return email, I will send you any surveys you may need. The online survey can also be taken in multiple languages as persons directed to it will easily discover."

Plastic Bags Needed: The Community Garden is starting to harvest our early crops. We need more plastic bags to transport and distribute the vegetables at the Food Pantry. Please put them in the bin in the narthex during the growing season. Thank you.

Please keep the following people in your prayers:

Ruth Blanding, John Bohlmann, Ashley Coyne, Kathleen Craft, Michael Day, Jane Gagliardoto, Kasey Gaulin, John Golden, Jack Gordy, Robert Guariglia, Andy Hall, Harold Hall, Liz Handman, Brooke Helton, Rev. Don Hoger, Dalton K., Barbara Knakal, Rosemary Leuken, Doris Mack, Andrew Mendelson, Rev. Tim Millard, Clifford Plass, Gerald Plass, Grace Plass, Deborah Porach, John Robinson, Pat Rooney, John Schroeder, Richard Secor, James Sheeky, Naomi Sleight, Debbie Stone, Gloria Veach, Candace Vincent, Cassidy Way, Bobbie Wells, Cliff Wells and Shawn Wheeler.

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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 (week ending July 6):	Tara Cotton and Lucille Ogden
Birthdays (next week):	Kenneth Tompkins, Sophia Mungo, Brooke Schroeder, Elizabeth Handman, Judy Douglass, Nancy Montero and Eden Ciferri
Acolytes:	July 6: Charlie Urban-Mead July 13: Skye O'Halloran
Altar Guild:	July 6: Team I July 13: Team I
8 a.m. Readers:	July 6: Debbie Belding and Jim Smyth July 13: Angela Henry and Paul Littlefield
10 a.m. Readers:	July 6: Russell Urban Mead/Sophie Ciferri July 13: Wilma Tully/Bobbie Wells
Ushers:	July 6: Dean Caswell and Austin Horne July 13: Saira Shahani and Pat Keefe
Pledge Clerks:	July 6: Deb and Doug Belding July 13: Janet Bright and Joanne Lown
Coffee Hour Hosts:	July 6: Summer Schedule July 13: Summer Schedule

This Week's Lectionary

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45: 11-18

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Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

NOTE: Audio recordings of some sermons are now available on St. James' website, www.stjameshydepark.org Look under "Worship"

Sermon Preached on
Third Sunday after Pentecost
(June 29, 2014)

"Testing"

I remember a date I went on once my Freshman year of college. We were walking along a path to the movie theater when she dropped something. I picked it up. A little while later, she did it again. I picked it up. The third time this happened, I picked it up but suggested she put it away since she was having so much trouble hanging on to it. She said she just wanted to see what I would do, to make sure I was a gentleman. I said, "You mean, that was like a test?"

"I suppose it was. I don't want to date the wrong person." That's when I began to wonder if I was with the wrong person. I just said, "I don't like tests."

As it turns out, I didn't have to worry about any more dates with her. The movie we saw was Monty Python's Life of Brian. I was rolling in the aisles with laughter while she sat in stony silence. Afterward, she let me know in no uncertain terms that it was a vile, irreverent garbage, and she was appalled that I found it amusing. I thanked her for an informative evening and never gave her another thought.

But the testing thing - I have thought about that over the years, and I am still of the opinion that testing a partner like that is tantamount to smacking them in the face. Because an emotional test like that implies a threat to withdraw love if expectations are not met. It is an underhanded form of control.

Which makes this week's reading from Genesis very strange. It says, God tested Abraham.

Why? What possible reason could God have for testing Abraham? This is a man, after all, who according to scripture left his family and moved to a foreign country at the command of a God he had only just met. This is a man who circumcised his entire household at the command of this God, seemingly out of the blue. I would have loved to be a fly on the wall of the tent when he delivered that divine message to the men. And this is a man who sent his

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firstborn son into the wilderness and near certain death at the word of God. How much more could God be assured of Abraham's fealty?

But now...now God says, "Go sacrifice your son to me."

I don't know about you, but something sounds fishy here, if for no other reason than nowhere else in scripture does God command child sacrifice.

And frankly, if I were Abraham, I think I might have said, "No more. If I'm not good enough for you now - if you're not willing to keep the promises you've already made, then I guess we're done." This would have been especially possible for Abraham because, remember, at that time, they believed there were many gods out there, and you could change loyalties.

Now, before we go on, I should hasten to add that there is such a thing as positive testing. Teachers give tests, and the results matter. Driving examiners give tests, and it is important how you do. Certainly, if anyone is wise and smart enough to test us, it's God. So who am I to say God shouldn't be testing Abraham?

Here's the thing: this is no test of wisdom. It's an emotional test with the implied withdrawal of all the previous promises. And it does not sound like God.

More importantly, it doesn't sound at all like Jesus.

Look at today's gospel. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me...whoever gives a cup of water to even one of these little ones in the name of a disciple will not lose his reward." That's no test. It's a promise of good.

Even more, By saying, "Whoever welcomes..." Jesus is broadening the disciple's understanding of whom God loves. Look through the gospels and see if you find any threats by Jesus to withdraw his love.

So, going back to Genesis, I would like to suggest that this passage says more about the writer than it does about God. That is, while the writer may have assumed it was a test, that seems unlikely.

If that's the case, then what WAS going on? It's unclear. Remember that these stories were handed down from generation to generation, for hundreds of years before they were committed to parchment, and oral history is not known for its strict historical standards. It's more known for putting a spin on things that don't make sense.

(By the way, before you come down too hard on the author for fudging the truth, there was a recent study that stated that a lot of that wonderful stuff we post on Facebook is hokum. Every day, we spin the events of our lives to make us look better or to make a better exciting story. Why would the early Israelites be any different?)

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Anyway, SOMETHING probably DID happen with Abraham and Isaac, which is why this confusing story is told at all, but it might not have been so benign.

You may remember 10 years ago when I went on my first sabbatical here, I spent my time studying and writing about this very relationship between Abraham, Isaac and God. Given what I've just said about this story and the historical accuracy of the writing, I came up the theory that it was all a cover up. I suggested that Abraham WANTED to kill Isaac because Isaac had defects which made him, in Abraham's eyes, unsuited for leadership.

In my story, Abraham's encounter with God on the mountain, God stops Abraham from murdering his son and helps him understand that he DOES love his son despite what he thinks. God assures Abraham that he can trust God to lead the people even with a leader as flawed as Isaac.

Is it true? I don't know. That's why I put it in the form of a novel. But I am convinced that the story as we have received it is not accurate.

And even if it were. Even if God DID want to push the 100+ year old Abraham to the breaking point with one more thing, the evidence from Jesus is that this is no longer God's way. Jesus does not test. He guides, he urges, he even commands, but he never makes it a test, never threatens to withdraw his love if we fail to meet his expectations. That is the Good News of Christ. There is no testing, there is only the promise of love in this world and eternal life in the next.

And that's a promise I believe. Amen.