



SUNDAY SERMON

Redefining Greatness

Dear Nicholas, Francisco, Penelope, and Brian,

I have written you this letter on the day of your Baptism. I am honored to be here with you. As three of you are infants and too young to pay much attention to what I am saying, I hope your parents have saved this letter so you can pull it out and read it now and again.

I'd like to share some thoughts about your baptism and life with Christ. To put it as directly as I can: in the sight of God, you are a beloved and precious child. No matter where you are, no matter what you may have done or left undone, you are God's beloved. And God is always, always, always with you and within you, offering you a chance, when you need, to begin anew. When you fall, when you make mistakes, when you sin, God is always ready to forgive you and help you begin anew.

You will find – or, perhaps you already have – that this makes all the difference in life. At least, I have found it to be so. Because it means that, whatever the past, the future is filled with hope. In baptism, God is making a promise with you. God is promising, "I will never abandon you. I will always love you. So do not ever despair. Rather, hope. For I can heal, redeem and renew – and I shall. Live in hope, always. This is my promise to you.

Now, God's blessing is given, in part, that we may be a blessing to others. The apostle Peter has written, "Whatever gift each of you may have received, use it in service to one another, like good stewards dispensing the grace of God in its varied forms." As you are now part of the body of Christ, you have been given all that you need to share Christ with others, with the world. Remarkable, isn't it – that we may be a means of grace. This seems straightforward – as if we were given access to a deep pool of living water, and all we need to do is invite and show others the way, so they too may drink and never thirst.

But as we heard in this morning's Gospel, along the way, it can get complicated. You might think it enough to be one of the twelve, chosen to spend your day with Jesus. But, no. Those twelve fell to squabbling over which one of them was better, more deserving – which one is the greatest.

As our Bishop Mariann has pointed out, 'we are marvelously contradictory creatures. We can live with more than one reality at the very same time. We can experience profound grief and joy in the same hour. It is possible to have everything going right, yet feel half alive. Or to be facing a terminal diagnosis and to feel the most alive. We can be kind and caring, and hurt someone deeply – not only those distant, but those close in, those we love.'

Continued

DATE

Pentecost 18
Sunday, Sept. 23, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

VERSE

Mark 9.30-37

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

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Greg Jaffe wrote in the Post last week of our current paradox: that voters “want the anger to stop but can’t stop being angry.” We can be right and wrong at the same time. We are both sinners and saints. While we could all point to someone who’s clearly tipped the scale one way or the other, we’re all a mixed bag. What to do?

In this instance, Jesus does not question the human proclivity for competitiveness and pride; he does not scold the disciples for trying to outdo, for vying to be the greatest. He simply changes the definition of greatness. You want to be great? Be great at serving others. Be great in giving and generosity. Be great in compassion. We have some of this at St. Columba’s, don’t we? We want to be a great church. Okay. Let’s be great in love, in embracing those who differ from us, who look different, vote different. Let’s be great in truth-telling, integrity; in humility and generosity. This, too, is life in baptism, life in Christ. Blessed, forgiven, a blessing to others – yet complicated: as sinner and saint.

So two things about that. First: practice. Like the disciples, we’re on the way. We have choices day by day, hour by hour. Practicing life with Christ comes down to basic, daily choices: as we take time to be still and pray. As we open our eyes, notice the world about us and give thanks. As we are mindful of the needs of others, and respond. Often what we do is small in itself. But those practices shape a life.

In the next two days, each of you will receive an invitation to share in one vital practice – an invitation for you to stop, to reflect on some of the blessings in your life, whatever you’ve received from God for which you’re thankful – family, friends, health – or at least another day; your home, your hopes. And with thanks to God, to make a financial pledge to the church. I don’t know about you, but like those disciples I get caught thinking my well-being is up to me. So I try to pay attention and say thank you – to God, to others. Cultivating a grateful heart is a spiritual practice; generosity is a spiritual practice. As vital for our souls as prayer or compassion.

As with any practice, we are each somewhere along the way. It’s neither good nor bad; God loves us just as we are.

My journey on this path began as a child, putting a nickel in the offering plate, a portion of my allowance – determined not by me, mind you, but by my parents on my behalf. When I first pledged as an adult, I was asked to calculate what percent of my income I was giving. It was meager, far less than one half of one percent. Importantly, it felt to me, not enough. My pledge didn’t accurately reflect my faith – or the faithfulness I sought. Each year, for many years, I took another step. Giving became a way for me to affirm my intention.

As my income fluctuated, each year I based my increase as a percentage. Rich, poor, or somewhere in between we can each do that. Quite a few years ago, I got to the point of pledging a full ten percent of my income to the church, and that has been my practice ever since. Sarah and I also give to other organizations. To be honest, I feel called to give more. Not because I think I’m not being generous, but because I’m aware of and grateful for all that I have and I’m aware of so many who have not.

The last thing I want to say – and it’s very important. We’re baptized into community. We’re not alone. That is the beauty of the church. We are in this together. Each of us on our own little path, making our way the best we can. Coming together, to support one another, to pray with one another, encouraging one another – as Peter said, “like good stewards dispensing the grace of God in its varied forms.”

Together, as St. Columba’s, as the body of Christ, we are a most extraordinary witness of love to the community around us. Of every age and depth of faith, creating community that is great: in mercy, in truth, love, justice and generosity. Thanks be to God.