

Will It Hold?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 29, 2012.
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Mark 1:21-28.*

For the first sermon after Bill's departure, the scripture confronts me with Paul's teaching about defiled food and a story from Jesus about a crazy man. Welcome to my world! Bill probably looked ahead and planned this!

The first is a serious teaching from Paul to the Corinthians about how to live as new Christians. The issue—whether food offered to pagan gods could be consumed once the hocus-pocus was done to it—is not particularly relevant to us. And, yet, the snapshot it gives of a church community in conflict is painfully apt. There is absolutely nothing new in this world: the issues may change, the people doing the yelling are different; but believers have been at odds for as long as there have been people believing. The passage is worth a full sermon or two for one of its sound bites: "Knowledge *puffs* up, but love *builds* up." The world of religion has seen more than its share of knowledgeable but exceedingly well-puffed spokespersons whose love quotients seemed a bit low.

The gospel lesson is one of numerous healing stories—stories frankly that we are not sure how to hear, how to process. Most of us hold them in some sort of suspended brain state into which we put "religious" things that don't make any sense to us. Despite that, there is a great lesson in the story. Jesus, though in the midst of an important and new teaching, stopped what he was doing when he encountered a desperate man in great need—being present in the moment, refusing to place anything, even good teaching, above the command to love. There is plenty for us to glean from that.

Both, then, are strong stories; yet, what really catches my heart today is the springboard these readings offer for our life together. This week and next, the day of our annual parish meeting, I want to have some leeway to talk about a couple of issues that lurk under all that we do in the faith business. Trying to remain true to our historic tradition and relevant in a world that, despite America's particular type of widespread religiosity, is increasingly secular is not an easy task. First, this week the question: How does an institution love more than it teaches? And then next: How does an institution that of necessity is obsessed with its sustainability live in the moment? Both are questions which for me certainly find some resonance in these particular scriptures and beyond any doubt are consonant with the overarching teaching of scripture. My points are not tight or doctrinaire. They defy any attempt to "power-point" them, a fact in which I actually take considerable delight. But they loom large in my experience as a priest and, therefore, matter a great deal to me. My invitation is that you struggle with me in understanding them better.

I often wonder what someone with no context or shared tradition thinks when he/she drops in one Sunday morning, someone perhaps on an archeological dig through the contemporary American scene of organized religion. First a pat on our backs; I believe he/she finds a welcoming community, certainly a friendly one. We constantly need and want to do better in inviting people in beyond the first stage of welcome. But an initial visitor, I truly believe, is well greeted. After that positive beginning, beautiful music, an awesome space, and well considered words are offered. But what does he or she think about the words being said, about what we are up to?

Upon further thought, the deeper question for me is what do we think? What do we really mean by our presence, by the words to which we give assent, by our actions in this place? To what are we bearing witness? Many of us wiggle with visible discomfort when asked to get specific on many of the basic tenets of our faith. Let me be clear: I wiggle when pushed for great specificity or clear confessions of orthodoxy; and even more frankly often find myself in some conversations thinking, "Smile beatifically and be quiet; what you want to say could do more harm than good—particularly to yourself!" Praise God for the still quiet voice that says, "Keep it to yourself, Bozo!"

Interestingly, and perhaps predictably as a landmark, our architecture gives us a great

lesson. Granted, not many churches in the world have the remarkable opportunity of being taught by Goodhue himself how to “do our faith.” But with such great luck, we would be crazy not to hear what it teaches us.

Here is a lesson: Capaciousness is next to godliness. Almost anyone who walks into St. Bart’s is struck by it, the grand openness and generosity of space—the lack of religious clutter, the soaring ceiling which sometimes seems infinite, the distant apse around the altar in this configuration, the magnificent dome over the altar when the platform is used, and this elevated pulpit that is never as important as the altar, to mention only a few of the features that proclaim openness.

This is my point: please listen carefully so that I will not be misunderstood. The architecture, with its mystery and space, better reflects our theology than a hard line reading of our scripture and tradition. Example. Recently talking about *The Book of Mormon*, which I have yet to see on Broadway but want to, I made some very politically incorrect comments about being freaked out by some Mormon claims. I mean divine happenings in upstate New York, special apparel, etc. The person to whom I made the comment looked at me like I had two heads and finally said, “Have you considered the farfetched stories in your tradition? And as for apparel, are you aware of the fact that at this moment you are wearing a religious outfit?” After facing the fact that I don’t really like this person, I got his point.

Space: spaciousness of belief, claiming tradition for what it is, a stab—an often beautiful, sometimes disturbing stab—at understanding that which lives deep within us and yet profoundly beyond our capacity to grasp. We just don’t have an abundance of answers, but we have one another as we search together.

It is how we *live* the faith—let’s be honest—that takes us from that which became a very limited and narrow embodiment of what many wanted Jesus’ life to be about, to a broad and embracing view of the world to which I believe Jesus is in fact calling us. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he admonishes these new Christians to revere love more than knowledge. In our overeducated, erudite lives or paradigms for life, we resist that comment, choosing to hear it as anti-intellectual. Not so at all; Paul was brilliant. He simply was saying that often being right (let alone simply presuming that we are right) wins but at the expense of love.

We have on occasion claimed that we are firm in the middle and soft on the edges. I guess I know what that means. I know I have always liked the sound of it. What I am asking us to get clear about is this: what *is* the firm center. Is it a definitive view of Jesus’ death—was it an act of substitutionary atonement? Much of our tradition suggests so. Does the firm center include literal understandings of creation, the Virgin Birth, the miracles of Jesus, his physical resurrection? Does the firm center contain any literal belief or the requirement of believing anything literally?

In truth my guess is there are as many descriptions of the firm center as there are people gathered. And further I suspect that there would be equal horror at how firm and how soft the center is, some startled that they are in communion with such “literalists” and others that they are gathering with such apostates!

Here again a brief return to one of the stories this morning. Jesus made no judgment about the man with the unclean spirit, the man I unkindly referred to as crazy. As the story goes, it did not occur to Jesus to be concerned about what had made him crazy, whether he had done such egregious things that he needed to be locked up, or whether he might relapse and mess everything up for this wonderful little band of God’s children. He simply acted upon the radical grace of God and welcomed him in. My God, can you imagine? In this simple story, Jesus shows what we all long to know: there exists a place, a love, and a presence greater than any of our imagined or actual demons or evils. It still takes my breath away.

That, my beloved friends, is the firm center. It is messy, frightening, contrary to institutional dictums, threatened from without and within—and filled with love.

Will it hold? Will it sustain us while we ponder the doctrinal tweaks demanded by modernity? With all my heart, I believe it will. It will hold if we give it ample room to come into our lives; it will hold if our devotion is absolute, our worship pure and inquisitive, and our claims modest in detail and extravagant in love.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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