

11 Pentecost 2003
Pray it Forward
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A lot has happened since the last time I was here. But St. Peter's hasn't changed. Like the people in this morning's reading from Joshua the people of St. Peter's have made a decision. **We will serve the Lord.**

The Episcopal Church has been rocked to its roots ..and the dust is far from settled ..but less than a month after the upheaval of General Convention ..here you all are still busy ..Building Christians for Service. You have kept the main thing the main thing.

So let's enjoy ourselves. How about a little risso therapy ..a little healing through laughter. The first time I heard Fr. Rufus preach about that I thought it was just an attention getting technique for his sermons ..but the more I've heard it ..the more I realize the truth of it ..laughing softens us up for healing. Here goes:

St. Peter is busy at the Pearly Gates but he has to leave for an important meeting and by the time he gets back there's a long line of people anxious to get into Heaven ..some have been waiting for several hours. As the first person approaches, Peter apologizes for being late and says "we can move this right along ..just tell me how you spell God." The man spells G - O -D ..St. Peter opens the gate. The second person comes up ..once again Peter apologizes for his tardiness and has the individual spell God ..and once again the gate swings wide. The third person steps up .. Peter once again says how sorry he is for the long delay. That's it ..the cork pops .."Who do you think you are, Peter? Do you think I have nothing better to do with my time? Do you know who I am?" "I've been waiting for nearly four hours. Peter is amazed. He steps back and apologizes again and in his most soothing voice say "all you have to do is spell this word ..and I can admit you." "What's the word? Let's get on with it." "Spell Nebuchadnezzar."

It was almost Easter ..time for the little boy to go to Sunday School with his big brother for the first time. As they walked along, the older boy said, 'If I've learned one thing, whatever the question is in Sunday School ...the answer is Jesus.' When they arrived at church, their Sunday School teacher had a large box on her desk with little holes punched into it. She told the children she wanted them to guess what was in the box. Two or three people guessed ..'is it a turtle?' "is it a hamster?" They were wrong so she gave some hints "it has whiskers ..it has long ears ..and a puffy tail." The older boy sat thinking, his little brother whispered "I know that the answer is Jesus ...but it sure sounds like a rabbit to me."

And ..this is one of my favorites. A little boy has three kittens that he wants to give away. He approaches the Baptist minister as he sits on his porch talking to another man and tells him “I want to give these kittens to you because being a Baptist is the best.” The preacher thanks him ..but explains that the Baptist Church already has a cat. A week later the little boy takes the kittens to the Episcopal Church ..he tells the Rector “I want to give you these kittens because being Episcopal is the best.” The Rector thanks him and asks “Don’t you remember me, I was with the Baptist Preacher when you said you wanted the kittens to be Baptists.” The little boy thought and said “that’s true ..but now their eyes are open.”

Why is that one funny and kind of poignant too? Now, don’t you feel better? I guess each story makes a little moral point. Don’t grieve the Holy Spirit of God ..Sometime it may not look like it ..but Jesus is the answer ..and Our eyes are open.

I think that’s what happened here at St. Peter’s ..your eyes were open because with some guidance from Fr. Tom, your Senior Warden, and others the issues and possibilities of the General Convention were given a thorough airing for a month before the gavel fell. Each week more people took advantage of the forum and the on line discussion. They were ready for whatever happened. When it did the talk immediately turned to “what can we do now to keep our eyes on the prize ..to keep St. Peter’s St. Peter’s?” And that’s where we are today.

There are disagreements and there are disappointments and there are differences of opinion ..but there’s been no renting of garment or gnashing of teeth. We’ve got a good thing goin’ and that’s not going to change.

I’ve been part of forums on the convention issues at three other churches ..last week ..in Norfolk a man asked Bishop Vache “what IS the moral absolute in the Episcopal Church?” The Bishop said “Love God ..love each other.”

Paul, in our reading this morning from Ephesians is on to a line of thought that often causes the raising of eyebrows. This **wives be subject to your husbands** stuff is a little ..well UNmodern. But he also says **husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.** ..women and children first.

Husbands need to live a life that deserves the subjective respect of their wives. How’s that? But wait there’s more ..**He who loves his wife ..loves himself.** ..and then he talks about **nourishing** the body **tenderly caring for it** his language may not be PC but his heart’s in the right place. Self loathing at either end of a marriage would be an awful burden to carry.

How do we get past whatever sin and evil has thrust us into so that we can “love” ourselves? We pray for healing. We pray that we can be filled with the love ..the light ..of Christ and become the person He has in mind for us to be.

Start with the main thing ..your own heart. Get that straight and concerns about the whole state of Christ's church and the world ..can be kept in perspective.

Like Joshua ..what Jesus has to say in our Gospel lesson this morning ..is tough love. **I am the bread of life** he tells them **whoever eats this bread will live forever**. This, say some of the disciples, is a hard saying ..we can't build the movement with this kind of talk ..some followers begin to withdraw. The whole concept is kind of repugnant to Jewish sensibilities ..kosher meat has no blood in it ..and here's this talk about drinking blood. Jesus is offering a test of faith.

He's not going to change the message because the polls say what he's talking about his ruining his approval rating. Clearly the faithfulness and spiritual value of a ministry cannot be gauged by it's popularity. Deep facts and doctrines must be preached whether the people like it or not ..whether they alienate people or not. Even Christ's ministry lost members when he refused to swerve from the truth. Can we be more clever than Christ? Can we maintain our faithfulness to God and the truth ..AND ..be popular too?

Jesus does not soft peddle. He does not withdraw or modify ..in fact, he tells them, things even more amazing are going to have to be faced and thought out. The numbers of people slippin' out the side door is apparently enough for Christ to ask **Do you also wish to go away? Lord to whom can we go?** Peter replies **you have the words of eternal life**.

Okay ..so there are going to be issues and concerns that we are at odds with. There are going to be things we don't understand ..but it doesn't mean we can't work through things together. After all we too know the **words eternal** we too eat of the **bread of life**.

We accept the resurrection promises of Christ ..we gratefully receive the gift of eternal life. The rules are simple Love God and Love one another. The rest is academics and interpretation. **It is the spirit that gives life ..the flesh is useless**. We get to choose ..like Joshua and the Jews ..God or all of the rest of it.

Years ago I got a three a.m. call from the disc jockey on the air at the radio station where I worked. His son had stopped breathing and he had put on a long record and left for the hospital ..hoped I could get to the studio before the record ended. His son lived. He lost nearly all of his motor skills ..and wasn't expected to live very long.

That was 18 years ago ..the boy is still alive. He is one of the best looking young men you'd ever want to see. Bright blue eyes ..blond hair ..and a ready smile ..but he's twisted up like a pretzel and can do few things for himself.

God took a hand in this life. The computer has changed this boy's world. Now ..in spite of the useless flesh ..the spirit is revealed. He is able to express his thoughts ..his feelings ..his love ..

The spirit ..the true life ..is beautiful. Nothing is convenient for this young man ..but, thanks be to God ..(from whom all healing comes ..often in ways we do not expect) ..he is able to communicate through his computer ..to our hearts ..and help us keep our balance.

Colin ..that's his name ..has little exposure to the sin and evil of our world ..he is not often in situations where he must do hand to hand battle with the influences of our neo-pagan culture ..his concerns include the day to day functions that we take for granted ..that we do without thinking ..Colin is forced to keep the main thing the main thing ..and he fills the rest of the time loving is mother ..his father ..his friends (who are so used to him now they never talk about what he can't do) ..and loving God.

I guess I can tell you that for a week after I'm here ..I brag on St. Peter's. Folks at All Saints are always anxious to hear about Fr. Tom ..a number of them have joined the on line Bible study ..so I take the opportunity to talk about the spirit of St. Peter's ..the energy ..the openness ..the ever growing numbers of people in joyful pursuit of the knowledge and love of Christ ..I also mention the food pretty regularly.

For this congregation ..for this faith community of friends there is still the kingdom to be gained ..and the thrill of joyfully pursuing it. We are sure ..like Simon Peter ..Christ is the son of the living God.

This morning we are here for the sacrament he left us. We will eat the bread of life. Let us pray earnestly for healing in our lives ..in our relationships ..in our church ..in our world ..it may not turn out to be the healing we want ..but ..let's be ready to accept the healing we need ..and when it comes ..never be afraid to share it.

Let's continue to Build Christians for Service ..one soul at a time. Now ..more than ever ..Let's pray it forward.

AMEN