

Second Sunday in Lent, 2009: St. John's, Roanoke

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal, a bottle of wine, and good conversation they lay down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend.

“Watson, look up and tell me what you see.”

Watson replied, “I see millions and millions of stars.”

“And what does that tell you?” Holmes asked.

Watson pondered for a minute and then said, “Astronomically, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Chronologically, I deduce that the time is about a quarter past 3. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Why, what does it tell you?”

Holmes was silent for a moment, then he said, “Elementary, my dear Watson, someone has stolen our tent!”

Our challenge, as modern Christians of the Episcopal persuasion, is to not complicate Lent too much. It is a journey. We will have to accompany Rabbi Jesus for these forty days and be willing to arrive at Jerusalem. He has told us what will happen there. We may not want to follow the whole way. Peter wasn't sure he wanted anything to do with this suffering and dying that the rabbi had been talking about. He had just confessed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and now this Messiah was talking about suffering many things, being rejected by the chief priests and scribes (who believed they had in fact earned God's favor by hard work, ingenuity, power, and competition), being killed, and rising on the third day. Peter wanted the Messiah to be the earthly kind; powerful, regal, issuing orders from a golden throne, with Peter as his Secretary of State.

In order to get Peter and the others to not complicate things and to see the simple way, Jesus had to rebuke Peter and call him Satan's stooge. Being put back in favor with God, Jesus is saying, is not something that can be accomplished using worldly standards or methods. It is a gift, it has to be accepted, and he would pay the awesome price to bridge the chasm between human beings and God the Father. The knowledge of our acceptance by God, in spite of our unworthiness, is important for three reasons.

First, God's grace is a call to humility. None of us can boast about our status as Christians. We are all sinners saved by grace, through faith. The opposite of humility is pride. The three most deadly things in the world are pride of power, pride of prestige, and pride of pocketbook. At least two of those were present in the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees. Jesus wanted them to know and wants us to know that pride of power and prestige is among the most offensive sins to him.

Dwight Moody, the great preacher of a generation ago, said, "It is well that a person cannot save himself, for if a man could work his way to heaven, you would never hear the end of it. Why, if a person gets a little ahead of others and manages to scrape together a few thousands dollars, you will hear him boast of being a self-made man. I've heard so much of this sort of talk, that I am sick of the whole business. And I'm glad that through all eternity in heaven we will never hear anyone bragging about how hard he worked to get there."

Kind of like the man who survived the Johnstown flood. He just had to tell everyone about how he managed to find a floating tree limb and spent four days floating around until the waters went down. Finally, the man died and asked St. Peter at the pearly gates if he could tell the folks in heaven about surviving the Johnstown flood. "Well, of course you can. But I think I need to remind you that Noah will be in the audience."

Accepting God's unmerited, unrestrained, and unlimited love for unworthy humanity is, first of all, a call to honest humility. We are all sinners saved by grace through faith. None of us is superior to any other in God's eyes. We cannot earn God's favor. God's grace is a call to genuine humility.

Secondly, God's grace is a call to compassion. Once we accept our status as sinners saved by grace through faith we can begin to look at others with compassion. Rather than dividing the world into have and have-nots, deserving and undeserving as many are prone to do, we can move toward a genuine acceptance of all people.

Ed Beck, former basketball star at Kentucky, under the legendary Coach Adolph Rupp, is an ordained minister and was part-time Chaplain for the US Olympic team some years back. Once, he said, he thought that the kingdom of heaven was like the best, well-trained, first-class athletes. Watching our 1984 Summer Olympic team practice at the Air Force Academy, Ed Beck stumbled upon a great truth. He happened one day to wander down to an adjoining track where the Special Olympics were being held for that region. He watched as eight of these Special Olympians lined up for the 100-meter dash. All eight

charged over the starting line at the sound of the gun, but suddenly a small-framed boy among the eight stumbled and fell to the track and began to cry loudly. What happened next was an amazing and beautiful thing. The other seven heard the fallen boy crying and all seven stopped and returned to help. One large-sized girl bent down, kissed his hurt knee and said, "That will make it feel better." Then all eight joined hands and walked across the finish line to the roaring approval of the crowd.

Ed Beck changed his mind that day about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Like Peter before him, Ed was reminded that if we are in the race just for ourselves, just to be number one, we might well lose it all. In this modern self-centered, competitive at all cost, isolated, and suspicious world, we can learn a lot from those Special Olympians. We might have a better shot of making it ourselves if we concerned ourselves with compassion as much as we do with competition.

When we come to God in the new-fashioned way, not striving to earn it but simply receiving it, we are led to a sense of humility and compassion for others.

Finally, God's grace is a call to ministry. If, while we were unworthy and undeserving, Christ would die for us, then we are to give our lives in service to others. We begin with humility and compassion but the time comes, Jesus said to Peter and to us, to take up a cross. Crosses are not laid upon us from outside but are voluntarily taken up out of gratitude for God's amazing grace. The Gospels point out that Jesus is primarily a "verb" person. Consistently he instructed his followers to *do* something.

Many of us are like the folks in the small town in Tennessee who had built a new fire station, bought new uniforms for the volunteer firemen, upgraded their equipment, and set the date for the dedication. During the activities the station had its first fire alarm. However, the firemen and local dignitaries didn't want to interrupt the ceremony, so they called the firehouse in an adjoining town to answer the call for them. As we accept the grace of God we are moved, as individuals and as a church, to humility and compassion but more than anything else, we are led to a sense of mission. One of the challenges here at St. John's is to enlist more and more people to serve in the various mission and ministry efforts that are being conducted locally and abroad as our way of responding to God call to us.

When we accept the fact that none of us is deserving of God's grace, not one of us can justify ourselves before God, and not one of us can earn our way into a life-giving relationship with God we are moved to humility, compassion, and a

sense of mission. And then we fall on our grateful knees before the one who has passed the test for us by suffering many things, being rejected by the world, going to Jerusalem and being killed, and on the third day rising from the dead.

We have been saved by grace. Now we are called to go in the name and spirit of this one called Jesus the Christ and take up our cross of service in this sick and dying world. It is our only chance of crossing the finish line together.
Amen.