

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

January 21, 2007 – Third Sunday After Epiphany

Texts: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

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Grace and peace to you from God, Immanuel, and Jesus Christ, our brother and friend.

What are your credentials? In any given specialization we want to make sure that our doctors, our dentists, our professors, our teachers, our pastors, our contractors, our lawyers etc, have the experience and training to show competency in their profession. We expect it and we demand it. We would never hire a plumber to paint a mural just as we would never hire an artist to give us a medical check-up. This just makes sense.

What credentials you do have, don't often hold the same weight when you go home. Even if you are the best lawyer in town—you will not succeed in winning an argument with your mother. No matter what your specialization is-- you may always be seen by some as that same kid who ran around getting into trouble—now all grown up. Going to those places where we grew up can be full of a great amount of emotion. It can be relaxing to go back to the familiar. It can also be full of frustration trying to convince the people who remember us when we were kids that we are now adults.

I want you to take a moment and think of your own visit or visits to your hometown or hometowns. Do you reminisce when you visit the places where you once played? Do different places trigger different memories? Do you take a familiar walk just for old time's sake? Do you visit your old haunts? Do you spend time with old friends and acquaintances?

Going home can be an emotional experience. Going home can be filled with anticipation, expectation or with apprehension. The streets can be the same and yet ever so different. Some things remain the same and other things change. Going home can mean going back through many memories.

In the text that we heard today Jesus' goes home. Imagine what it was like for him to visit and to see the people of his childhood. His memories must have been full of the images of his childhood. It is also in this text where we meet at an intersection of the humanity and the divinity of Christ. We can relate to his going home and to his childhood memories. We also heard that this is where Jesus revealed his ministry to the people who knew him since he was a child. The divinity of Christ is made known. It is in this text that we find that Christ comes out in his hometown. Aw but there is a twist to our story. It lies in the very intersection between the humanity and the divinity of Christ. What are his religious credentials? He is after all

only a carpenter's son. He is trained in carpentry, not rabbinical studies. Who does he think he is?

Like, many coming out stories this one too, is filled with questions, challenges, tension, fear, relief, drama and suspense. (I don't want to give away too much because next week this text continues on.)

In the midst of this drama is God. God calls us out and offers credentials in surprising ways. God surprises us in ways that offer hope to the oppressed, and the ability of people to gain understanding. God's credentialing program has gone on for several millennia. For among us there have been people who have been prophets, who have stood for justice, who have advocated for another, who have realized God's great love, who have pressed forward for full inclusion, and who have witnessed miracles of reconciliation and relationship building.

For several months this congregation has been praying for Pastor Bradley Schmelling and St. John's Lutheran church in Atlanta. We have witnessed a congregation and a people who have realized that love is love even if rules say otherwise. He is currently on trial for being in a loving and committed relationship with another man. These last few days his trial is going on...even as I speak. In Pastor Bradley's defense, Jim Mayer, a seventy year old man spoke yesterday. Mayer grew up believing that if you are gay then you are bad. He was against Pastor Schmelling becoming his pastor. He thought it was a terrible idea and left the congregation. Pastor Bradley regularly called his wife and through this relationship, Jim Mayer eventually was won over. Mr. Mayer's credentials in defense of Pastor Schmelling, I suspect are rooted in the divine act of transformation, relationship- building, respect, and love.

This trial is not just about Pastor Bradley. The ELCA has put itself on trial. What will come of this trial is not known. Yet, whatever the "verdict" is. God's love will persist. God's call to Pastor Bradley will not be swayed by the ELCA and any church body for that matter. God's love of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, straight allies will continue. God will be present and God will continue to be that voice that cries out for justice.

This past week we honored a great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.. This year my mind wandered and wondered about the many other leaders who stood with Martin Luther King, Jr.. More specifically I find, lately that I am hungry to include white allies who stood with people who are black. I am hungry to find heroes of the civil rights movement who took great risks to stand outside of their privilege and to stand with those who are oppressed. I found heroes such as Virginia Foster Durr, a southern belle who chose to stand with her women friends who were black. Morris Dees who left a successful business to specialize in civil rights laws and to speak out of injustice. Lois Stalvey, a mother who struggled to raise her children in an antiracist home. These stories of ordinary people who were called to examine their life and the life around them offers hope to this white woman who struggles to be an ally for all my students. What is common in these white allies is that God's credential came at a time of great distress. There was a moment of kairos, a moment when something special happened that caused each of these individuals to decide to do what is right. In the late 60s and early 70s these people were considered to be social outcasts (pariahs). Today, Durr, Dees, and Stalvey and many others are heroes.

For this congregation a kairos moment happened when we called an out lesbian couple to be our pastors. This congregation faced a trial and later expulsion from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. We have been a lighthouse to many in this world and a beacon of hope. As a congregation we have and continue to ask what is next in this ministry of ours. Where do we go next? We have to continue to ask that question because our ministries continue and we continue. We must look, see and gain understanding of what is next in this journey. Who do we need to walk with and stand in solidarity with? This, to me, is more of a prayer based on the conviction that if I am to live an open-minded and examined life then I must be willing to listen to the call of those who are oppressed. I must listen with a discerning heart and ask for God's guidance.

Now, I want to turn our attention to the good news. God has called each and everyone of us. God's credentials are offered for all and we may especially see them in moments of kairos. Moments when something special is being made. A moment when a decision is imminent and potentially transformational.

We are children of God. God knows our hearts and our minds. We will sometimes do the right thing and sometimes we won't. Know that God loves you and that you are forgiven.

Know that you will have kairos moments that you will have to choose. Know that you are always welcome to God's table.

Know that God loves you. Remind yourself of this every day, every morning and every night before going to sleep.

Know that God forgives you. Remind yourself of this.

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