

XI TRINITY 2014
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
I COR. 15.1 ST. LUKE 18.9

✠

Alaska...the Last Frontier...breathtakingly beautiful...a testament to God's awesome power. It can also be unforgiving to those who approach it on their terms...unprepared for the challenges that come with living and working in its frequently harsh environment.

One such man who met the challenge was Father Hudson Stuck. Father Stuck immigrated to Texas from his native England in 1885 when he was 22 years old. He was a pioneer in every sense of the word. He taught in one-room schools and worked as a ranch hand, before going to seminary and was ordained a priest in 1892.

Father Stuck had deep compassion for the underdog. He founded a night school for mill workers, and homes for indigent women and children. In 1903, he succeeded in getting Texas to pass the first state law against child labor. He was committed to causes of social justice and often crossed lines others wouldn't or couldn't. He preached racial tolerance and was vocal in his opposition to laws that kept blacks and poor whites from exercising their right to vote.

Father Stuck also shared a trait in common with Saint Paul...he had no tolerance for people he found disingenuous. After Mass one Sunday, a wealthy member of the parish handed him a check with specific instructions how it was to be used. Father Stuck considered her request to be self-serving. He tore it up and handed it back to her. His memoirs don't say if she was at Mass the following Sunday.

During the eight years Father Stuck was Dean of Saint Matthew's Cathedral in Dallas he did much good work. He was happy in his work there... but ever the pioneer...he wanted to do something that was both spiritually and physically challenging.

In 1904, Father Stuck became the Archdeacon for the Yukon and the Arctic. His commitment to the native peoples and their cultures resulted in the establishment of missions, schools and hospitals. To reach the isolated settlements, he traveled by riverboat, dogsled, and even on snowshoes. Father Stuck reported that over a 12-year period he traveled over 30,000 miles.

Father Stuck practiced what is sometimes called "muscular Christianity". It combines humility...the kind of compassion for others he showed all of his life...with vigorous physical exercise. That combination of spiritual and physical strength prepared him to co-lead the first successful ascent of Mount McKinley in 1913, which he always referred to by its Athabascan name...Denali...the Great (or High) One. And it prepared him for his work as a priest in Alaska and the Yukon.

In 1916, Father Stuck was asked to deliver the sermon to the graduating class of Columbia University in New York. He saw a great lesson to be learned in the Parable of the Lawyer and the Tax Collector. He warned those about to begin lives of service to others that if money and fame were their goals...that's all they would get...they must learn to give more of themselves...they must learn what it means to serve...they must learn what it means to love another human being.

The Parable of the Lawyer and the Tax Collector is about our attitude toward others. It is a "where-is-our-heart-at" story. It is easy for us to be super-critical of the lawyer and identify with the humility and sense of unworthiness shown by the tax collector. But we must all recognize something of ourselves in the smug self-righteousness of the lawyer, or we risk missing the point of the story. We do at times like to remind God of just how good we are...or we think we are.

Saint Paul makes it clear in the Epistle that the Good News he is passing on to us comes with a commitment to act accordingly...like people who have been saved...and who know how to show love and compassion. Father Stuck made a life-long commitment to helping others, whether it was from his comfortable study at the Cathedral in Dallas, or from the back of a dogsled somewhere North in Alaska.

Father Hudson Stuck died of pneumonia in Fort Yukon near Fairbanks on October 10, 1920 at the age of 57. He is buried in the native cemetery there. It is a testament to his work among the Athabascan people that the Chief of one of the villages is to this day always an Anglican priest.

Father Stuck would tell us...God our Father is always ready to forgive us...but we do have to be willing to approach him on his terms...ours often just get in the way.

✠