

WHITSUNTIDE WEDNESDAY EVENSONG 2016

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

BISHOP WILLIAM MCCLEAN, JR.

– PSALM 84:11

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“I HAD RATHER BE A DOOR-KEEPER IN THE HOUSE OF MY GOD, THAN TO DWELL IN THE TENTS OF UNGODLINESS.”

The text for this evening is – of course – from the Psalm appointed for this Ember Day in Whitsuntide.

Many years ago now – a railroad proposed abandoning service on a spur line to a small town on the prairie. At the public hearing on the matter – a farmer stood up and insisted that the railroad line was necessary and vital for the town.

The railroad representatives asked him how often he shipped his crops or livestock on this rail line. He said he couldn't remember ever having shipped anything anywhere on the rail line. Then he was asked how often he used the passenger service the line provided – and he replied that – to the best of his recollection – he hadn't taken the train anywhere in the last fifteen years or so.

Finally – the railroad rep asked him just what was so important about this spur line on the rail system. The farmer replied – eyes aglow and smiling from ear to ear: “Well – for cryin' out loud – I walk down to the station every evening and watch the six o'clock roll through.

When we think about it for a moment – we can see that this farmer is like some people we've known – especially when we are only a couple of months past the celebration of the Queen of Feasts. He sounds like folk who show up in church on Christmas Eve and you wish them a Happy Easter – because you won't see them again until Easter – when you can't wait to wish them a Merry Christmas! We often refer to folk such as this as being on the fringes of the church – just as the farmer was on the fringes of the rail spur. He didn't really support it – but he argued like the dickens as soon as they wanted to take it away.

We are all familiar with those who fit this “fringe Christian” definition. They are the ones who show up only now and then and prefer to have NO involvement. They want no part in the day-to-day life of the parish family. But – they do NOT want the parish to go away. They simply want the church to be around for those times when THEY need to be a part of it.

We might think that Thomas the Doubter was a little like this. Of course – Thomas isn't the only person in the New Testament who might sound like that. There's also St. Peter – standing there in the courtyard – denying his Master. I think it's only because of the way he is usually described – that we think of Thomas the Doubter as our best example. He even seems to us to be an Apostle on

the fringe. He's rarely mentioned. As a matter of fact – most of our knowledge of him comes from just one story. And there – he is certainly on the fringe of the group of Apostles. The first time our Lord appeared to the Apostles – Thomas was missing. He had had a lot of problems dealing with the resurrection – so you see he was on the fringe in more ways than one. Now he wasn't sure if he could believe what they were telling him. Maybe it's because of his position out on the fringe that caused some of them to look at him as one who failed an important test of faith.

I think it's easy for us to think things like this about Thomas and all those others we see out there on the fringes of the church. It's easy for us to look down on them – I mean after all – THEY are on the fringes – not us. We look at them as people who have failed the test: getting up on Sunday morning to go to church instead of the mall or a ball game or the gym. What can ANY of these other activities do for our eternal salvation?

So why do we sometimes feel the way we do about such people? I think it's because it makes us feel better than them. But there's a problem with thinking like this. While we have been busy patting ourselves on the back about how wonderful we are – “Jesus came in and stood among them and said” Did we hear?

An old man went to the ear doctor to see if he could get some help with his wife's hearing problem. The doctor told him to go home and stand about twenty feet away and ask her a question. If there was no answer – then continue to move towards her and ask the same question.

So – home he goes – and about four o'clock he stands about twenty feet away and asks: “Myrtle – what's for dinner?” No response. He moves to fifteen feet. No response. Then ten feet – same thing. Now he was at five feet. “Myrtle – what's for dinner?” She answered: “For the fourth time – it's lasagna!” Those who have ears to hear – let them hear! Ah – but do we?

No matter how comforting our thoughts of those fringe Christians might be – our Lord doesn't let us listen to those thoughts for very long. When Thomas was out on the fringe – Jesus went to where Thomas was – and He gave as much as He needed for Thomas to overcome his doubts. That's important for us. Jesus didn't give up. Nor should we give up on our fringe Christians. We call on the Holy Spirit for help and guidance as we work to bring them into fuller fellowship in the Body of Christ in our own parish. Perhaps through you – they come in from the fringes and exclaim with Thomas: “My Lord and my God!”

There are many who are out there on that fringe. They come to church perhaps because they feel they SHOULD be there – unfortunately not too terribly often. But – like Thomas – they aren't around when all the excitement happens. The sad thing is that the absence of Christ in their lives can

be a very real thing for these folk. Unfortunately for many of them – they’re like the old man in the anecdote; they aren’t ready to listen.

They aren’t ready to be involved because it takes more than involvement. It takes commitment. The chicken that provided your eggs for breakfast is INVOLVED. However – the pig that provided the bacon – well – he’s most definitely COMMITTED!

So there they are – hanging around out there on the fringe – waiting to see Jesus – waiting for Him to call them by name – waiting for Him to come and stand with them. Is Jesus whispering in your ear saying that He needs YOU to speak words of encouragement and welcome to them? Are you twenty feet back – or five?

There’s a little story about a small parish out in the hinterland that was attempting to do something to get some parish growth. Many people in the small community had been identified by members as potential new parishioners. They are out there on the fringes.

At its first meeting – volunteers were asked to visit the new prospects on a particular Ember Day evening in Whitsuntide. Among these volunteers was a wonderful old gentleman named Sydney.

Sydney was a great – friendly – all around person. He had been a member of the parish for over four decades now. But – he had one big issue. He had a problem with stuttering.

One of the prospective members was a wealthy judge who had been approached by every single church in town – except St. Swithen’s. When the volunteers drew names – Sydney and his wife drew the judge’s name. With much reluctance they went to visit the judge. Later – they came back to the church and acknowledged that their visit had NOT been successful.

The next Sunday however – the judge and his whole family came to the parish. The Rector was astonished as he drew the judge aside on his way out of church. He asked him why he had come to worship at St. Swithen’s. The judge smiled and told the priest about Sydney’s visit.

You see – Sydney drove his old jalopy up around the circular drive and parked it right in front of the door. He got out and knocked loudly. When the judge opened the door Sydney asked him if he was concerned about his immortal soul. When the judge said he hadn’t given it much thought – old Sydney responded: “Th – th – th – then, s – s – s –sir, you are g – g- g- going to hell.”

The judge looked at the rector and said: “Of all the people who have come up that drive and knocked at my door and asked me to come to their church and worship with them – Sydney was the only one who expressed a personal interest in me!”

We might say Sydney could have expressed himself just a bit better – but the fact remains that his general attitude can’t be improved.

I pray you are not here this evening as fringe Christians. I pray you are here to celebrate the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Good News that He has risen from the dead. The Good News that He comes and stands among us and says to us – just as He did to Thomas and the others: “Peace be with you.” He is NOT a dead God – but rather one who is very much alive and vibrant. He is One who stands among us as Head of the Church – militant – expectant – and triumphant – offering us that peace which passeth all understanding.

So you see – no matter where we are – right in the center of the hustle and bustle of parish life – or somewhere out in the fringes – Jesus gives us as much of Himself as we need as long as we are serious about serving Him for “it is better to be a door-keeper in the house of our God, than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness.”

No matter where we find ourselves – no matter what the time of day or night - our Lord comes to us and says: “Peace be with you! How will you reply? The response is left up to each of you as our Lord stands and waits. Will you respond with the answer of faith – and say: “My Lord and my God!”

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