

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH B. GARDNER

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost



12 August 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

8:00 and 11:15

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:2

A story is told of a young man, an unsavory type, who falls for a saintly young woman. Knowing that she will not so much as look in his direction, he slips into the vault of the town cathedral.

There he finds one of the masks of the saints used in the annual town festival.

He puts it on and takes on the demeanor and behavior of a saint.

Before long he begins to court the saintly young woman.

Surely enough, over time, she begins to fall in love with him.

As the relationship flowers and deepens, the young man’s scoundrel friends become envious of him.

One day, out of sheer spite, they challenge him in the center of the town square, in the presence of his beloved, to take off the mask and reveal his true identity.

Dejected, knowing all is lost, he slowly removes the mask...

only to reveal that his face has become the face of the saint.¹

We don’t know the origin of this story but it is an apt metaphor for our lives as Christians.

Like the young man in the story, we seek the one we love, or want to love more deeply, by behaving in ways we think is like Him.

We bring our true selves which are common and ordinary – and direct our actions to the extraordinary one we desire.

We try to act in ways that are pleasing to God.

The place we come to find our mask is in the church itself.
It is here that we are formed you might say to know what God wants for us.
Not necessarily in the bowing or the kneeling but in a greater sense.
In the loving and praying and compassionate and forgiving ways we know God behaves toward us.
So we fix ourselves on Jesus.
Week after week, we do things here that remind us of Jesus.
And ideally, over time, as we wear the Christian mask we are transformed from the inside out into better Christians.
We begin to find ways outside of our worship service to demonstrate our Christian-ness.
At home, at work, at school, in our communities and our families we take on the behaviour and attitude of Christians.
Of course we also know this is a cautionary tale.
We must take great care to identify Christian desires because, as Tim mentioned last week, the one that thrives is the one we feed.
And so we follow Paul's instructions...
Striving to put away falsehood,
To speak truth to our neighbors,
To get angry but not to sin,
To work honestly,
To say only those things that build up and give grace,
To put away bitterness and wrath and anger,
To be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving.
To be imitators of Christ.
We long to become, with help from the Holy Spirit, more like God.
And we do this by acting like the person we want to be even before we fully believe we can be such a person.
What makes us different from the young man in the fable is that he took the first step... while for us, it is a second step.
Our acting like Christ is our response, it is our reaching back to God's reaching out to us.

Luckily, of course, God never stops reaching out to us, holding us, guiding us...
regardless of how unsavory we are.
God never lets us go... even if we pull our hand back.
And what we discover in this attempt to become like Christ is that being a Christian is
about becoming a certain kind of person.
It is that simple.
But simple doesn't mean easy.
Or if it does, we somehow have to make it hard.
The crowds grumbled, "How could Jesus be the Messiah?"
"Isn't that Mary and Joseph's kid from down the street?"
Can such an ordinary man be anything but... well, ordinary?
Why not?
What were they so afraid of?
Afraid that God might be like them...
It is an amazing claim, isn't it?
That a common, ordinary son was also the divine, extraordinary Son.
Why are we afraid of ordinary?
Don't we use ordinary bread and wine and water as extraordinary ways to encounter
God?
Don't we use ordinary words to share with God our deepest desires and longings,
our hopes and dreams,
our disappointments and sadness?
God uses our ordinary lives and ordinary things to be extraordinary examples of love
and light and life.
And we could use some ordinary goodness right now.
The world needs Christians who are willing and ready take on the demeanor and
behavior of Jesus.
One easy way to do this is to listen.
To listen first and then respond.
To ask questions.
To seek understanding before being understood.

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To ask questions.

To seek understanding before being understood.

Because the world needs us to be better.

Not louder.

Not bigger.

Not even stronger.

Better.

Better because of what God does through us.

Better because God believes in us.

That is how we, ordinary Christians in the world, bring about extraordinary change.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

9:00

If we had Books of Common Prayer in the garden I'd ask you to turn to page 298.

Just before the service of baptism there is a page called Concerning the Service.²

On page 298 it tells us “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church.”³

It goes on to say that this bond, established by God, cannot be broken.⁴

Well today we have four baptisms!

Four opportunities to welcome new members into our family.

Our parish family, our Episcopal family, our Anglican family, and our Christian family.

A family that looks and acts as crazy as it is wonderful.

But there is a distinct difference between this family and our earthly families...

And that is that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Nothing.

No nasty emails.

No fight at Thanksgiving dinner.

No marrying the wrong type.

No disinheritance.

Now that doesn't mean we don't sometimes try to get kicked out of the family.
Or slip out the side door and hope no one notices.
If your life is anything like mine, you try to wrest your hand out of God's grip.
It is hard for us to imagine with so many earthly reminders around us that the hand we extend today to the Berkley family will never let them go.
Ever.
Because the bond we make in baptism cannot be broken.
In baptism there is a fundamental change in the nature of our being.
We have a fancy church word for it but it means there is a decisive alteration in who we are.
When our youngest daughter was Confirmed at 13 she told us she felt the Holy Spirit move and change her with the laying on of hands.
She entered the Cathedral one way and emerged after the Confirmation service a different person.
I know many of you have felt that same ontological change in your life - whether it was at your baptism, or confirmation.
Perhaps it was at your wedding.
Or when a child was born.
Or when you decided to leave behind something or someone in your life.
That is why baptism is more than simply a single event.
It is a beginning step where we continue to grow and live to be the people God intends for us to be.
It is lifelong and transformative in the truest sense of the word.
In just a few minutes there will be a series of questions and answers about Christian living as we renew our commitment to live this transformed life.
Will we pray and teach and learn?
Will we resist those things that draw us from God and, when we fail, to turn back toward God?
Will we share our love of God with others?
Will we see every person as a sister or brother?

Will we see someone in need, and when we can, make things right?

Will you join me and help me live a life of one who can call God Father, as a beloved child?

Will you become an imitator of Christ with me, working to put away bitterness and hate, wrath and slander?

And, when I fall away, as I've been known to do, just remind me that the bond I have made through my baptism cannot be broken...

Because God never lets go.

Let's welcome the Berkleys into our crazy, wonderful Christian family.

And let's never let them go.

¹ Farwell, James W., *The Liturgy Explained* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013) pp. 1-

² Some of my favorite parts of the Book of Common Prayer are entitled Additional Directions or Concerning the Service.

³ Book of Common Prayer 1979, p. 298.

⁴ It really says indissoluble but no one would actually use that word when talking.



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