

The Good News

St. Mary's Church, Newton Lower Falls, MA 02462

617-527-4769 Email: office@st-marys-episcopal.org

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Our First Encounter with Epiphany

Editor: The following article was adapted from Peter's sermon on January 11, the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

When I went shopping for an Irish Terrier, there were, at the kennel, all of these frisky puppies running all over the place. That is; except for the one who jumped onto my lap and stared at me adoringly. The feeling was mutual and after a few minutes of love at first sight the owner proclaimed: "I can see you belong to each other." I call this our "Baptismal moment together" because the experience of Baptism is essentially an encounter with an intimate sense of belonging.

New parents, Steve and Amy, experienced this when they first laid eyes on Ella. They knew once and for all that they belonged together. In the context of the first three gospels, "Baptismal belonging" comes with the pronouncement that: "You are mine and I am yours." This message appears in the first three gospels as "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Our major encounter with Epiphany in life comes with the recognition of belonging.

I was talking with my brother about this recently and he said, "Our sense of belonging shouldn't be confused with a sense of ownership." Jesus belongs to God because he is meant for the whole world. We do not own anything in the world of God's creation. "All things come of thee O Lord and of Thine own have we given thee."

Peter doesn't own Riley; although Riley acts at times as if she owns me. Amy and Steve do not own Ella. We are all a part of God's creation and as part we are made in the image of God.

In the church, "baptismal moments" are an indelible sign of belonging when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. On page 845 of *The Book of Common Prayer*, the standard definition of what it means to be made in the image of God is given as, "the freedom to make choices, to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God."

To live with this sense of harmony is to experience the belongingness of God. I believe that deep within us resides a place of belonging: a place where no one else but God belongs; a place beyond manipulation; or ownership, and control; a place of belonging that even we cannot possess by ourselves. As with all our inner feelings, we more often than not take this place of belonging for granted. We spend most of our lives without giving much credit to our heart, mind, lungs or soul.

Augustine said that within this place of belonging God is always present, even when we are absent. We discover this place at the moment of Baptism when we hear the voice "You are mine and I am yours."

We cannot own this place, but we can embrace it with the richest sense of belonging. Just as Amy and Steve cannot own Ella, they can embrace her like God does. They can experience the Epiphany of Baptism.

Christianity vs. Churchianity

Editor: The following article is adapted from an essay by The Reverend Amos A. Phelps, a 19th century Congregational clergyman in Boston. A graduate of Yale Divinity School in 1830, Phelps served as pastor of Congregational churches in Hopkinton and Boston. Later he became an agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and pastor of the Maverick Church in Boston. He was best known for his anti-slavery writings. Phelps' essay was obtained from ZWT Reprints, September 1883.

There is a difference, we may premise, between the real and the nominal Church of Christ. The former is composed of all true Christians. Its boundaries are therefore invisible, as no man can tell exactly where to draw the lines. The latter is composed of those who assume the Christian name and practice the ordinances of God's house. It is commonly called the visible Church, because its boundary lines are known. The epithet may apply to a single local society of a given denomination, or to the aggregate of local societies of all denominations. We use the term, in this paper, to designate the outward or visible Church.

1. Christ and the Church are not identical.

There may be ten thousand Churches, but there is only one Christ. Nor can all those Churches supply the place of our one, blessed all-sufficient Savior. A man may be saved without the Church, but he cannot be saved without Christ. A man may be in the Church and not be saved; but he cannot be in Christ without salvation. Sinners sometimes become members of the Church; but only saints are members of Christ. A person may live in the Church for years, with the old heart of carnality and selfishness; but "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." The requirements of the Church are often wrong and ruinous; but the claims of Christ are always reasonable and right. The Church may become a sink of pollution; but Christ is ever the perfection of purity. The Church may be rent with divisions; but Jesus Christ is not divided. The Church may become terribly entangled in mysticism and error; but Christ is always the embodiment of light and truth. The Church may change her name and her nature; but Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." The Church may be a crutch to walk with, but she is a poor Christ to trust in for salvation and eternal life.

2. Christian worship and Church worship are not identical.

Vast multitudes cling to some Church establishment as a drowning man would cling to a life-boat. They bow obsequiously to her priestly and official mandates, and imagine that the blind servility which they tender to the Church will be accounted acceptable service offered to Christ. The simplicity of the Gospel is lost in the imposing forms and glittering accompaniments of modern churchism. Splendid church edifices attract the eye. Splendid music charms the ear. Splendid prayers are addressed to the congregation. Splendid sermons please the fancy, and leave deluded sinners to slumber on. Church rivalry has achieved a glorious success, if success thundering organs, ostentatious dressing, theatrical singing, pointless praying, rhetorical preaching, careless hearing, and unscriptural practicing!

Much of the current worship is done by proxy. Lazy religionists surrender their sacred rights to others. They take it for granted that the preacher is on the right track, and readily swallow whatever may be doled out from the pulpit, without using their own brains in searching for the hidden treasures of truth. Thus religious ideas are transmitted from generation to generation, until tradition exerts a more powerful influence than the Bible in molding the sentiments of men. There comes to be a fashionable faith, as well as a fashionable dress. To embrace a certain stereotyped circle of doctrinal views entitles a man to the claim of "orthodoxy," but let him not venture one step out of the beaten track, if he would not be denounced as a deluded heretic! But few have the moral courage to question the decisions of the Church, much less to discard what she has labeled as "orthodox." The verdict of a few leading denominations has thus grown up into a threatening tyranny; and the multitude cannot think of stemming the mighty tide. So they bow down in their narrow enslavement and worship this curiously fashioned but pious-looking idol - the Church! Since all idolatry is an abomination to God, we have no more right to worship a church than we have to worship a golden calf!

We rob the Lord of His rightful honor, and ourselves of the highest bliss of Christianity, by looking to the Church too much, and "looking unto Jesus" too little.

What can be done to deal a staggering blow to this cruel church- worship of the day, and at the same time give us more exalted and ravishing views of Jesus Christ? There is a grand failure to carry out the ultimate design, when the appliances of the Gospel result only in the production of Churchianity. Our perception, our prayers, our faith and our adoration must overleap the narrow precincts of the outward Church, and rise up to the eternal throne! “Worship God!”

3. Christian fellowship and Church fellowship are not identical.

The followers of Christ are called upon to “love one another with a pure heart fervently.” Indeed, this is one of the Scriptural tests of discipleship. “We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.” All Christians constitute one family, and love is the golden tie designed to bind their hearts together around the common cross. But love is a tender plant that needs to be reared with a hand. Hence the many exhortations of Scripture to “consider one another,” “be kindly affectioned one to another,” “esteem others better than ourselves,” “bear one another’s burdens,” “exercise a forgiving spirit,” “let brotherly love continue,” “endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.” All such injunctions point out the danger of alienated feelings and poisoned affections, and show the importance of making a special effort to promote Christian unity and love. How disastrous are the results of not regarding these Gospel precepts!

—Tim Green

Epiphany Evensong with Music of Taizé on Sunday, February 8 at 5:00 p.m.

The Adult Choir will lead a meditative service of Evening Prayer in the tradition of Taizé. We will gather in the candlelit sanctuary for a quiet service of contemplation and music.

The Taizé tradition began many years ago in the ecumenical monastic community in Taize, France. Brother Roger, Taizé’s founder, arrived in the French village in 1940. In the midst of World War II, he dreamed of creating a community where reconciliation was a daily reality. He began by giving shelter to refugees of the war. Brother Roger recognized that the search for reconciliation was within each individual as well as within the community. People from around the world, especially young people, come to Taizé looking for meaning in their lives as they prepare for responsibilities in their own communities.

The liturgy of the Taize service is meant to “quiet the soul.” There is repetition in the words of the music, there is time for silence and prayer. There is no sermon or celebration of the Eucharist. The service provides an opportunity to become more peaceful and centered in the midst of our busy lives. Please join us for the Evensong service on February 8, followed by a soup and bread supper in the Parish Hall. All are welcome.

How One Views the World

This year while writing the Annual Report, I remembered what my philosophy professor taught us about rose-colored glasses. Seeing things through rose colored-glasses usually means to observe life with an attitude that things are better than they really are. However, my philosophy professor’s point was that our view of reality is colored by whatever perspective we take. For example, my view of the past year is filtered through the lens of the past month of snowstorms and cold weather.

In December, we had plans for making a Christmas movie with the Sunday school that was thwarted by the weather. We had planned to meet on two occasions if it didn’t snow. But it did. Then there were two Sundays when most churches were canceled due to snow, but we remained open for the sixty brave communicants who weathered the storm. During the past five weeks the operative words while scheduling events have been, “If it doesn’t snow.”

We have no control over the weather and that seems to be the feeling over the economic climate as well. We can do the best that we can do, depending on the weather. We can plan services, rehearse choirs, order name tags, turn up the heat and brew coffee, but what happens next lies beyond our control.

I am reminded of a friend's definition of evangelism. Evangelism is simply a matter of invitation. The only thing you have to do in terms of evangelism is to invite someone to church and the rest is beyond our control. The rest is up to God, or in some cases the weather. We can't try to be the best Episcopal Church in Massachusetts and not achieve the desired result, or as someone pessimistically put it, "It don't matter how good a Dunkin Donuts is if no one wants donuts."

Last year the vestry studied a book by Anthony Robinson entitled, *Transforming Congregational Culture* and one of the points made was how we face adaptive challenges. How do we face a change in the weather, or the economy, or the neighborhoods we live in? How do we tackle problems when the same old way of doing things no longer works?

Well, perhaps one way is to change the way we see the world and take off our rose colored glasses. According to scripture, there is hope when the world is viewed through the lens of the Gospel.

Byron Rushing, the state representative from Boston and an active Episcopalian recently talked about the election. As an African American he has heard over and over again the sentiment: "I can't believe it! I can't believe Obama is our president. I can't believe America elected a black man president of the United States." And Byron's response was, "Perhaps if we had believed it in the first place it would have happened a lot sooner."

My subjective attitudes color the way I view the world. If I am wearing rose-colored glasses and think everything depends on me and how so successful I am, then I end up disappointed. But if I wear those cool shades of faith that Saint Paul talks about, I can let go of control and gain serenity.

—Peter Chase

Upcoming Events

Women of St. Mary's Board Meeting on Tuesday, March 3 at 11:00 a.m.

At this meeting, the board will be discussing the WSM's outreach disbursements for 2009. Monies being disbursed are proceeds from the Foods' N Fancies Bazaar. This represents the St. Mary's major outreach program. If you have a particular charity you wish to support, you are invited to make your case before this committee. All are invited to attend.

All Parish Dinner on Friday, March 6 at 6:30 p.m.

Come one; come all. This is a special evening with something for everyone. The event features a social hour, potluck supper, children's supper and special program and a music program for all ages. A sign-up sheet is posted in the parish hall. Snow date: March 7.

The "Ask It" Basket

Q: Can you explain the season of Epiphany?

A: The term *epiphany* means "to show" or "to make known" or "to reveal." As with most aspects of the Christian liturgical calendar, Epiphany has theological significance as a teaching tool in the church. The wise Men, or Magi, who brought gifts to the child Jesus were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as "King" and so were the first to "show" or "reveal" Jesus to a wider world as the incarnate Christ. This act of worship by the Magi, which corresponded to Simeon's blessing that this child Jesus would be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32), was one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of all races, and that the work of God in the world would not be limited to only a few. Epiphany is not all about the Wise Men. Two other events associated with Epiphany are the Baptism of Christ (Luke 3:21), commemorated on January 11, 2009, and the Wedding at Cana, when Christ first turned water into wine (John 2:1-10). The length of the season of Epiphany varies, because although it always begins on January 6, after the 12th day of Christmas, it ends on the day before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent; and the date of Ash Wednesday depends on when Easter is. The liturgical color for the day of Epiphany itself is white; for the season it is green.

Editor: Tim Green