



Draw Near to Me

Reflections for Lent & Other Seasons

Offered by Deacons of the
Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee

Ash Wednesday • March 5, 2014

Introduction

Lent 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have always known that many of our deacons express their faith and spirituality in writing. Recently, it occurred to me that these prayerful thoughts need to be shared, so I invited all of our deacons to submit writings of their choice for this compilation. These reflections are provided on the pages that follow. This collection is intended not just for deacons by deacons, but for any and all believers and seekers in the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee and beyond. And while the timing of this project is targeted for Lent 2014, I sincerely hope that these passages will help you draw near to Christ in any season.

Of course we want you to enjoy these reflections, but we offer them with other goals in mind. First, we'd like you to know our deacons better and on a deeper level, not just by name but also through their thoughts and prayers. We are always seeking ways to bring our community closer together – quite a challenge in a diocese that spans roughly 18,000 square miles. Second, we hope these writings will benefit you spiritually and inspire you to think and pray in new and more profound ways.

You may notice in a few places that these pieces are sometimes not polished to grammatical perfection. We have intentionally limited the editing to format and spell check, and maybe added a title or illustration here and there. No corrections for grammar or wording were attempted in order to preserve these pieces as authentic works that remain true to what the authors intend to convey. We didn't want to compromise genuine, heartfelt tone because, in a work such as this, sincerity trumps formality.

I invite you to use this material in ways that are most beneficial to you and, by all means, please share it with others – but remember to give the authors and artists credit when credit is due. Feel free to print out hard copies of this document for your use or distribution.

God's blessings to you as we embark on another Lenten journey. May you seek and be found by God – and may the peace of the Lord be always with you.

In Christ's service,

Chuck

The Ven. Charles Zellermyer, Archdeacon
Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

January 31, 2013

“Love and Forgiveness”

Christmas was here – and GONE. Almost as soon as you can blink. We anticipate Christmas. We prepare for it. And then Christmas is gone in a flash. Perhaps that is one of the reasons we celebrate Christmas as we do. It is a fleeting pleasure.

Except in the Church. While we may not send or share a gift on each of the twelve days of Christmas, it is still a longer time to celebrate than just one day. Let’s face it – Christmas is way too immense to have just one day. And when you really consider what we celebrate at Christmas – God with us – even twelve days is far too short a time for such a momentous occasion. Even so, what were you really thinking when I greeted you at St. James’ on Sunday 30 Dec with a “Merry Christmas!”?

I bring this to your attention because this year we have the Season of Epiphany, when along with the Magi we proclaim Jesus as our Lord here on earth, we have a very short time before we begin Lent in mid-February. For a brief period we focus on God’s love for us in the person of Jesus and then it will be gone – almost as soon as you can blink. And then we have the focus on our sin and repentance.

Love and forgiveness. It doesn’t get any better than that. You cannot have one without the other. God loves us. God forgives us. That is a core message from Jesus. The thing is, we mess it up. We may say or think or feel that we love – and we do. But the love that we exhibit is a pale comparison to that which God gives us: unreserved, unconditional, self-sacrificing, completely volitional love. We imitate that as we love God and neighbor and self. But we are imperfect when we do. It is more important that we extend our love than we attempt to perfect it, because it is when we extend our love we are extending God’s love to others. It does not need to be perfect – just real.

The forgiveness part may seem to be more difficult. Which is easier – to forgive some one (whether they ask or not), or to ask forgiveness (of God or some one else)? Just as we are called to love, we are called to forgive and to ask forgiveness. You cannot separate them. Just as we have the ultimate example of love from Jesus, God also gives us the ultimate example of forgiveness – and I am reminded of this by the following quote:

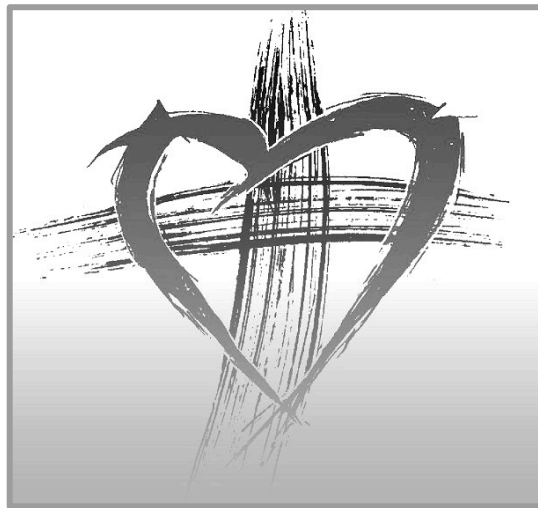
“When God says “I will remember your sin no more” it’s not about him forgetting, pretending he never knew – it’s the full-blown Semitic sense of taking it away, removing it, stopping it being a barrier. That is forgiveness. That is the great gift brought to us by our Lord on the Cross, and which we have appropriated through our baptism.”

-Br. Geoffrey Tristram Society of Saint John the Evangelist

Our forgiveness is, again, an imitation of God and a pale comparison. It may be imperfect, but it is more important that we extend our forgiveness than we attempt to perfect it. When we do so we are extending our love.

We are about to move into the six weeks of Lent. While we may be seeking forgiveness from God and others for our sins, perhaps we should also be considering how we might extend our forgiveness – and love – to God and others.

*your servant in Christ,
dcn. terry*



Lenten Reflection 2013: In My Father's House

By Deacon Chuck Zellermyer

Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

While this is a reflection intended for Lent, I believe it has value at any time and for any parent or someone who loves another as a parent would.

What parent at one time or another has not been in sheer panic over the well-being of their child? We do everything we can to protect them. We teach them not talk to strangers. We teach them to only eat healthy food.

Our daughters, Morgan and Kim, love to tell the story how when we were moving from one house in Waukesha to another we left the house I thought that they were Janet in her car and she thought that they were with me. Yes, we had left them behind. We did not realize that they were not in either car with us until we got to the new house. By the time we got back to the old house to pick them up they were quite amused with how little we cared about them. They were just fine. Hanging out with our neighbor. They knew all along that we would return to pick them up. Besides, they had more important things to do.

That must have been a little bit how Mary and Joseph felt when they realized after a full day's journey that their son was not with them. There are times when we don't give our children enough credit. If we taught them well, they can achieve things far beyond our expectations.

The most moving text of this passage for me is the last sentence "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." We love them, we protect them, and we teach them but God gives them growth.

Particles of Creation

By Deacon Cathy Milliken

March 2010

Dust. It is ubiquitous, unsightly, unhealthy, unlimited, and just plain annoying. Of all the problems facing humanity, dust is among the more trivial. Nevertheless, we devote a good portion of our time to battling dust and even hire people to do it for us. There's a huge market for products in our anti-dust arsenal. Millions of dollars have been spent developing, advertising and purchasing all kinds of items in the hope of eliminating dust. We now have vacuums with high efficiency particulate air filters; professional air duct cleaning; electrostatic and chemically-treated synthetic dust rags; masks and premium furnace filters made with the latest 3M technology... the list goes on.

The cleaning products aisle in any store is a testament to our hatred for dust. Even Jesus spoke with contempt about dust when he told the disciples to shake off the dust from their feet when leaving those who rejected their message. Over time, it's possible that we have dedicated more resources for dust control than we did to defeat communism – which, incidentally, generated a lot of dust as a result of all that bombing and tearing down of walls, but that's another story.

Unless you're a dust mite, dust has no redeeming value. As the only apparent beneficiaries of dust, those nasty, little bugs don't do anything to make the world a better place either. I'd like to say that dust is insignificant, but imagine living conditions if no one ever cleaned. The harder we try to get rid of dust, the more defiant it seems to become. Have you ever noticed how quickly dust re-appears after a surface has been wiped down? How can anything so persistent be so utterly useless? Is there anything more useless than dust?

We enter Lent on Ash Wednesday being told that we are no better than dust: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In a God-less context, this is a depressing reminder of our mortality, our fleeting and finite existence. The words puncture our self-worth. Surely the goal of Lent is not to wallow in self-loathing and feel useless. What's the point of that? How is God honored and how do we grow spiritually if we devalue ourselves?

Granted, Scripture informs us that God created humanity out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). But we were not created just to drift aimlessly like dust and land by chance at the pleasure of the wind. When God breathed life into that dust, He created more than our physical nature; God also instilled us with spirit. Our spiritual being – our hearts, minds and souls, our ability to love – is forever anchored in God who created us in His image. And anything made in the image of God could never be worthless. This point is even more profound knowing that God took our human nature upon Himself when the Word became flesh, known to us as Jesus of Nazareth.

In the Ash Wednesday collect we acknowledge that God hates nothing He has made, so it doesn't make sense to reduce Lent to a season of self-deprecation. When we do that, we become too inwardly focused and isolate ourselves from God. On the contrary, Lent is a time to draw closer to God through the humble and more productive disciplines of penitence and repentance. Penitence is regret for wrongdoing, but that is just the first step. Repentance is a change of mind that results in turning away from sin and doing a better job of reflecting the Image in which we are made. May this season of Lent be a time to realign and reunite our spirits with our Creator, who loves us unceasingly and more than we can imagine, all in the hope of everlasting life.



Source: <http://dust.com>

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

December 31, 2012

“Renewal”

Do you get the impression that this time of the year is a time of renewal? When you really think about it, we are bombarded with messages that have a theme of renewal. The first thing that probably comes to your mind is probably “New Year’s resolutions.” A number of us resolve to do something that will make us a better person, and starting with the change of the year is as good a time as any to start.

There’s another message – the new calendar year. It usually takes me a little while to form the habit of entering the number 2013 (instead of 2012) when I have to date something. We get another message when we are student and teachers that a new academic semester is starting. Many of us in the business world have a new fiscal year beginning. And here in Milwaukee I always look forward to the lengthening of time in the day that we have the sun for light and warmth.

There is a specific message of renewal that I bring to your attention. We are about to complete the Season of Christmas with the realization and acknowledgement that Jesus Christ came to us, to love us, and to show us the way to follow God’s covenant with us – Epiphany! God’s love for us does not need to be renewed. It is always with us. (For you math nuts, I would say it is THE constant.) But what about our love for us?

I feel that the renewal message here is for us to renew our recognition that Jesus is with us and that we love him back. It is very significant that our celebration of the first gentiles to recognize Jesus as the Christ. The three magi knew that something extraordinary was occurring, and they wanted to be a part of it. They did not completely comprehend the specialness, but they went way out of their way to bring their gifts to the young boy who was God-become-human.

How will you renew your love and commitment to Jesus? What gifts do you bring in serving our Savior? With the anticipation and waiting of a new rector it is obvious that the St. James’ needs a focus on renewal, as individuals as well as Community. However, that focus on renewal must not wait on the calling of a new rector. When we make Christ evident at St. James’ it is something extraordinary, it is because of an individual – YOU! It is not the rector who makes God’s love palpable at St. James’, it is – YOU! All of YOU as individuals come together to be the body of Jesus Christ.

When YOU come together for worship, for fellowship, for study, for service – that is when we, and all people who witness the Community, see and know God is physically present.

Jesus continues to be God-made-human through YOU. How and when and where will you renew your love to be Christ's face – hands – voice – ears – eyes? You can bring no better gift to God than that.

*your servant in Christ,
dcn. terry*



Source: <https://www.uoguelph.ca/christianforum/>

From the Deacon's Bench

November 2013

By The Rev. Ned Howe, Deacon Emeritus

Serving the Faces in the Sea

Recently I wrote about the difference between seeing the homeless as a sea of faces and as real individual human beings. I wrote about the difference between simplistic responses to dealing with the homeless and the reality that solutions must involve dealing with the multiple issues each person is facing and trying to cope with.

Recently we had our Rally Day, and you were asked to volunteer to serve in the programs we have at St. James' Church, asked to jump into the sea and save our friends from the streets, one face at a time.

This may sound like a monumental task. And, it might seem like we are just putting a Band-Aid on instead of a complete solution. Remember, however, that a Band-Aid is intended to cover a wound and prevent infection from spreading. Each meal at The Gathering, each piece of clothing at Red Door Clothes, each bar of soap at Sundries on the Avenue, each warm welcome, each smile, each word of encouragement offers hope. In time, that hope can bring the realization that there is a way back.

Ultimately, that is what service is all about. It is that service that we talk about in our mission statement, because in serving our fellow man, we are serving Jesus Christ.

We have the example of Jesus to follow. In His healing ministry, for example, there were no limits on whom he healed, be they lepers or possessed with demons, Jesus healed them. He taught that we have a responsibility to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless. He made no distinction about who were to be served.

To truly serve as Jesus would have us serve, we, too, must do so without restrictions or distinctions. This means that we must reject any thinking that prevents complete commitment to all we serve.

We must reject judgmentalism. It is not for us to judge whom we serve or whether we should be serving them, or we may sometimes be taken advantage of, but so be it!

We must reject performing service so that others can see us doing it. Closely related to this is being critical of those we feel don't serve as well as we do.

Closely related to the above, we must reject serving to serve our own egos. Self-serving service is not Jesus service!

We must reject the critics who question why we serve and whom we serve. They would

have us believe that “Get a job” ideology is the panacea to solve the problems and accuse us of enabling the problem to remain by serving. I would ask them, is it enabling to feed someone so they have strength to walk two blocks to file an application or talk to a temp service?

We must also reject the making service complicated with organizational clutter that interferes with the service. In Alcoholics Anonymous, we have an acronym we use a lot: KISS, which means Keep It Simple, Stupid!

Lastly, if you now wonder about serving after all of these warnings, be assured that serving our fellow mankind as Jesus would have us do is anything but negative. Yes, it requires a commitment but can we do less to serve our Lord?

Service to others brings us closer to Jesus. Serving others reminds us constantly of Jesus’ love for each and every one of us. Serving strengthens our faith. Serving others brings a joy to our hearts we cannot experience in any other way. Service brings a whole new group of God’s children into our lives to teach us in ways we have never experienced.

In serving, I have found faces who have become friends. Some have taken a long time:

The quiet man. Until recently no communication with anyone. Lost in his world of mental illness. Now, after some years, returns my greeting with a smile.

Virginia. Whose name I could never remember at Red Door Clothes. Now I remember and no matter where we meet, I’m enveloped in her arms for a hug and kiss.

Handshakes. I still don’t know his name, but he shakes my hand (almost breaking it) and is delighted if I respond by squeezing his hand.

The many men I see touching or kissing the statue of Mary as they come here for breakfast.

And I could go on with these people who are more than faces.

Recently I followed a custom of bringing a cake to share with the guest volunteers on my birthday, only this time Bob Heindl, who was handing out the tickets, informed all of the guests at breakfast that it was my birthday! I was overwhelmed with handshakes and hugs and birthday greetings. What really affected me was the realization that, while I had at least a surface relationship with a lot of the men, I never realized until that time how many of them really felt. Feelings were exchanged! That is why there is not just a sea of faces in a crowd, behind every face there is a human being, created in God’s image.

Discerning a Lenten Discipline

By Deacon REGS Scheeler

As Lent approaches I start to plan, what is going to be my Lenten discipline? When I was in college I did fast during Lent, my fellow religious students would tease me and say that giving up dorm food should not count as a sacrifice. After I was married I gave up eating popcorn during Lent, this was a snack I had every night. My wife complained that giving up popcorn was what I choose to give up, why should she have to give it up also, her discipline was giving up chocolate. So I switch to french fries. We continue to follow meatless Fridays during Lent, but we enjoy fish fries and seafood so it really is not a sacrificial discipline.

Several years ago I was talking to my spiritual director and she suggested instead of giving something up during Lent I should take something on. She even suggested that maybe I could choose something that I may want to continue after Lent. That first year I decided that I would reread the Sunday Gospel at least twice the following week and pray a short prayer that went like this. "Dear Lord show me why this reading should speak to my today, 2000 years after it was written." That Lent started me on a discipline I use every time I prepare a sermon or a Bible study class.

Over the years I have followed the practice of adding a discipline during Lent, and then continued using it after Lent. Some examples are adding breath prayers to my prayer life, adding vesting prayers before a service, reading a book or author that I just never seemed to have time for. These are just a few examples of things I have done in the past.

Last year I read a 10-volume set on the History of the Church, which had been sitting on the bookshelves in my office for about 5 years. This year I plan to read a book on the different religion of the world, this book is in the resource center, and the author of the book is Robyn Lebron, the wife of Father Robert Lebron, priest at Trinity, Janesville. The good news is my wife will not have to go popcorn free for Lent.

As Lent approaches consider adding something to your Lenten discipline. If you find this to be a beneficial spending of your Lent, I would like to hear from you about it.

*Your servant in Christ,
Dcn. REGScheeler*

Spiritual Training

March 2014

By Deacon Cathy Milliken

As I write, the Winter Olympics continue from the city of Sochi in southwestern Russia. I thoroughly enjoy the Olympics – winter or summer – and eagerly anticipate the Games every four years. I even like to watch the less-familiar sports, some of which, frankly, don't hold much interest for me the rest of the time.

I really appreciate the Olympics and for a variety of reasons. I admire the fortitude of the unrelenting athletes. In addition, there's the curiosity of a venue that's usually foreign and far away, sometimes in a place I've never heard of. And, call me Pollyanna, but I see hope and optimism as inherent qualities of the Games – hope generated by respect for and cooperation with people of nationalities other than one's own, a hope that translates into optimism that peace is possible. Do you remember the Olympics back in the days of the Cold War? We never rooted for communist athletes, but we held them in high regard for their talent, discipline and sheer determination. The eastern block athletes appeared stoic, but we could see them as human beings who feel pain, anxiety, and exuberance just like anybody else – and that was good.

Have you noticed, with each Olympiad, how the athleticism just keeps getting better as people go faster, higher, and farther with more and more finesse? The standard of excellence is raised every four years in the quest for perfection. It wasn't that long ago when a triple rotation in any sport was just about unheard of. Now, athletes pull off quadruple spins on a regular basis – often very high above the ground and at incredible speeds. In particular, the freestyle skiers blow my mind. I cannot imagine some of the moves they perform on purpose! I grew up skiing in Washington State and, back then, it was understood that anybody careening downhill, flipping end over end while airborne, was in trouble – this was known as an "eggbeater" and it usually didn't end well!

While the Olympics are billed as a celebration of sport, the real value of the competition, in my opinion, lies in the implications for us less-sporting mortals. The Games are inspiring and serve as a reminder and an example of how to approach life with discipline, tenacity, courage and vigor; to pursue excellence and not quit in the midst of failure and disappointment – to come back however many times it takes, more determined than ever to get it right. That is indeed a powerful life lesson. It makes me wonder: what if we brought even a fraction of such commitment to our faith?

This year, I want to enter Lent with that perspective. Yes, it will remain a solemn season of penance, but not defined by guilt and feeling unworthy. After all, what would that accomplish? If anything, we should know with every fiber of our being that we are worthy – otherwise, all that Jesus accomplished on the cross is lost on us. He wouldn't have done it if we don't matter. So let us exercise penance with a purpose this Lent, a sort of spiritual training, so that we might emerge in time for Easter stronger and more confident in our faith, better Christians who are more committed to our Lord and each other, and more joyful than ever in Christ's victory that will eventually be our own.

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

February 28, 2013

“Thank You”

Miss Lila Price was my 5th Grade teacher at the Sixth District School in Covington, KY. To say that she was strict and a taskmaster would be an understatement. (think Minerva McGonagall) This was all the more remarkable considering she was old (at least she looked ancient in our young eyes at the time), and petite. I could look her eye to eye, and I was the shortest boy in my class at well under 5 feet tall! She was responsible for getting me interested in learning, recognizing I was pretty much bored in school.

Yet – one of the things that I remember most about this remarkable educator was that she would typically start each day with, “This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” For those of you who are not experts with the King James Bible (which I am not), this is Psalm 118: verse 24. It was Miss Price’s way of starting the day by giving thanks to God.

You may be asking why I am attempting to wax poetical, so here is the rub: How often do you begin the day by giving thanks to God? It seems that a lot of us wake up to the alarm, only to grumble out of bed to either grab some food & drink (coffee, anyone???) or to head to the sink & mirror to begin making ourselves presentable to our co-workers, friends or fellow students. And during that daily routine, do you ever perk up and say: “This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” or something like it in more contemporary language?

The point I am trying to make is that we typically do a fairly lousy job at thanking God. I bring this up not because I am intimately familiar with your morning routines or your spiritual disciplines. The familiarity I have with you is at our weekly (and sometimes semi-weekly) corporate worship experience. During the Prayers of the People have you noticed that we are pretty good about listing and mentioning others in prayer (this is called Intercession). But when we get to the opportunity to bring up our thanksgiving, the usual thing we hear is – silence.

Perhaps you are offering your thanks to God silently – in your heart as opposed to on your lips. If so, that is great. But I would challenge ourselves (yes, I include myself as being one of the “frozen chosen”) to consider why we should keep silent about our thanks. Granted – it may seem uncomfortable and conceited to proclaim thanks about something in our life. However, why should we be quiet about thanking God, who loves

us so much. Is that in and of itself something that each and every one of us should be shouting from the mountaintops?

Consider what we do every Sunday when we gather for worship: The Holy Eucharist. Translated, this means the holy thanksgiving. When you look in the Book of Common Prayer, the entire part of the liturgy after the offertory is labeled "The Great Thanksgiving." The whole focus of our worship is giving thanks to God.

As we continue our Lenten journey together, I invite you to join with me by audibly offering specific, personal thanksgivings at the section of the Prayers of the People. Don't wait until your birthday rolls around so you can come forward for prayer. Every one of us has something (and, likely, many things) to offer thanks to God for – every day! I challenge you (and me) to share that with your faith community.

"This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Thank you God, for the gift of Miss Lila Price in my life, in the 5th grade and forever.

*your servant in Christ,
dcn. terry*



The Ultimate Happy Meal

April 2011

By Deacon Cathy Milliken

The words happy and celebrate aren't typically the first words one associates with Lent. After all, this is a season for self-examination and self-denial, when we are called to be honest with ourselves and face our sinful nature head-on. Not exactly something to party about...

Yet these words – happy and celebrate – resonate with me as a result of working with our Sunday school children on the sacrament of Holy Communion. Preparing for class has caused me to think anew about this sacrament, and I am grateful for fresh insight. I can't imagine better words than happy and celebrate to describe the act of coming together – communing – at the Lord's Table.

We casually speak of “having” or “doing” Communion when, in fact, the correct verbiage is to say that we celebrate Communion. The priest who presides at the Eucharist is called the celebrant, one who celebrates. I asked the children in Sunday School to think about why we celebrate Holy Communion in the true sense of that word: if we celebrate because we're happy, what should we be happy about during Holy Communion?

First and foremost, our Christian joy is based on the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Every Eucharist is a celebration of the resurrection, through which Jesus invites us to new and eternal life in him. We celebrate because we are happy and thankful that Jesus rose from the dead and waits for us in heaven. If that doesn't make us happy, I'm afraid we have a lot of work ahead of us...

Because of the resurrection, Jesus is really and truly present with us at Holy Communion. Jesus promised that he would be among us whenever two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). The very last words of Matthew's Gospel are spoken by the risen Jesus who again promised: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20). Our Lord continues to keep these promises. Through prayers, the priest consecrates the bread and wine, remembering Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, giving thanks, and calling upon the Holy Spirit to sanctify the bread and wine to be the Body and Blood of Christ. We call this the real presence of Jesus. How can we not celebrate knowing that Jesus is in our midst and unites us to himself through his sacrifice?

I once quipped that Holy Communion is the ultimate happy meal. I didn't mean to be flip, but respectfully offered that comment to make a point: unlike fast food that leaves us under-nourished and with fleeting satisfaction, the Bread of Heaven and Cup of Salvation truly sustain us – and the prize is awesome! Take heart if you gave up drive-through for Lent.

It's hard to stay disciplined and not get distracted during Lent. It's hard to stay submerged in penitence and resist pretty bubbles of temptation flitting upwards. It's

hard to keep from grabbing one of those bubbles and rising with it to the surface where we are relieved from the pressure of guilt and can draw a long, comforting breath. Why bother with Lent anyway? We know how the story turns out. We know what waits for those who believe.

We dive into Lent because the depth of our Christian joy is determined by the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice. May we sink to the humility of Christ and understand what Christ endured on our behalf so that we can genuinely celebrate the promise of rising again – otherwise, we risk bursting the bubble of a fragile faith and not having something substantial to keep us afloat.



Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

November 30, 2012

“Imagine”

I can only imagine. That is the title (as well as refrain and memorable tune) of a song performed by the contemporary Christian music (CCM) group Mercy Me that was very popular not too long ago. It is not a worship song, but more of a reflection of what might one do when suddenly coming face to face with Jesus.

That song has come to my mind as I consider we are about to enter the season of Advent, the beginning of the Church calendar year. Advent is a season of new beginnings, a time to reflect on Christ coming into this world. (If my high school Latin memories are correct, we would literally translate this as “to come.”) This is a time for us to consider what it means for Jesus to come to this earth, to be born human, to be and to know and to understand what it is to be like you and me.

You may be thinking, “Of course, Christ is always with us.” And you would be correct. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

So I draw your focus to the current day. Every day. Because each and every day, Jesus comes to us. He is with us in our hearts. More importantly, Christ is in every person we meet or see or pass by or honk at or ignore or hug... every single day. That is why the song “I can only imagine” comes to me at this time. If I really open my heart and my eyes and my ears, and you as well, we come face to face with Jesus a lot. The question is, do we take the time and the opportunity to really and truly realize that.

What would you do if you came face to face with Jesus in 5 minutes? What would I do? How might we act? How would we respond? We probably hope that we would act in a very loving way... that we would be thrilled beyond our wildest hope... that we would be nervous and scared... that we would open our hearts and fully embrace him.

In this Advent season, and in every season, and every day, let us consider what it would be like if we treated every person we encounter as if they were Jesus – because they are! What a world we would have, truly a bit of heaven here on earth.

I can only imagine.

The Tale of Three Trees

A Traditional Folktale by Angela Elwell Hunt

Adapted and submitted by Deacon REGS Scheeler

The Three Trees, stage left, start by sitting cross-legged on the ground, bent over. As the lumberjack talks they slowly sit up.

Lumberjack: Let me tell you a story about three trees. They started as seedlings and they grew up together. As they grew they had plenty of time to daydream and think about what they might become, and what kind of impact they would make on the world.

First Tree: When I grow up I want to be a home for a loving family,

Second Tree: Now when I grow up I want to be a boat.

Third Tree: And when I grow up I want to be throne for a king.

The three trees now move to their knees with arms slightly out stretched.

Lumberjack: Years passed. The trees grew. The rains came. The trees would tell one another their hope and dream.

First Tree: When I grow up I want to be a home for a loving family,

Second Tree: Now when I grow up I want to be a boat.

Third Tree: And when I grow up I want to be throne for a king.

The three trees now stand up with arms fully out-stretched. They sway side to side.

Lumberjack: More years passed. The sun shone and the wind would blow through their leaves. The trees continued to grow. As the trees grew their dreams also grew.

First Tree: When I grow up I want to become a great palace. A Palace so great that the whole world will recognize and know that a King lives within my walls.

Second Tree: Now when I grow up I want my wood to be built into a mighty ship. A ship whose passengers will conquer many lands around the world.

Third Tree: And when I grow up I want to be made into a Glorious throne. A throne so well known that the whole world knows that the greatest king of all time reigns from my wood.

The trees as they sway from sided to side they whisper their line together.

First Tree: Grand Palace *(say 3 times)*

Second Tree: Great Ship *(say 3 times)*

Third Tree: Mighty Throne *(say 3 times)*

Lumberjack walks up to the first tree.

Lumberjack: This tree will work well. With its wide and strong branches it will give protection to all that live inside.

Lumberjack cuts down the tree. The tree falls to the ground.

As the lumberjack moves the tree to center stage

First tree: *(whispers)* Protection to all that live inside, I'm going to be a great palace.

The lumber jack stands up the tree and adjusts his arms into a protective arch in front of the tree. A cow is now moved under the outstretched arms.

Cow: Moo Moo *(repeat every once in a while till the end of skit)*

(Other animals can be added if enough people are available.)

The lumberjack returns to the second tree.

Lumberjack This is a mighty tree. Just the tree I need to withstand furious waves.

Lumberjack cuts down the tree. The tree falls to the ground.

As the lumberjack moves the tree, stage right.

Second tree: *(whispers)* Withstand furious waves, I'm going to be a mighty ship.

The lumber jack stands up the tree and adjusts his arms into an arch in front of the tree. Tree rocks back and forth like floating on waves.

Fisherman comes out and steps into the arms forming the boat. Pretends to be casting fishing rod, and reels in a fish.

Fisherman: What a beauty! This will be great for supper!

The lumberjack returns to the last tree.

Lumberjack: This tree looks like it will do.

*Lumberjack cuts down the tree. The tree falls to the ground.
The lumberjack just shifts the tree a little bit and walks away.*

Third Tree: *(whispers)* I don't understand, I dreamt of being a Glorious Throne.

From off stage right a group of people walk over to third tree. In the middle of the group is a person with hands behind back looking like they are tied.

The lumberjack returns stands up the tree. Guard adjusts hands around prisoner like person is being choked.

Guard: For the crimes against you, you are to be hanged until death.

Group of people remove prisoner from tree, lay him on the ground, and cover him with a blanket. Lumberjack, Fisherman and crowd move off stage right.

After a short wait the Lumberjack walks over to the blanket.

Lumberjack: And on the third day he rose from the dead.

Prisoner stands up, crowd returns waving their arms in joy.

Lumberjack: Now that you know the whole story you see the trees did get their dreams. The first tree was the stable where Christ was born, and the second tree was the boat Jesus talked to the people from. The last tree became the cross on which Christ was hung. We may all dream of great things, but sometimes the simple things become the greatest in the entire world.

Cast

Lumberjack
First tree
Second Tree
Third Tree
Cow
Fisherman
Guard
Prisoner
Crowd 2 plus people

Prop

Blanket

The Wisdom of a Child

July 2010

By Deacon Cathy Milliken

Our mission trip to South Dakota presented opportunities for learning that I never anticipated. Every time I turned around, or so it seemed, there was another teachable moment. Without a doubt, insights will continue to surface for a long time. I am still just beginning to collect my thoughts and make connections, but I want to share one experience that touched my heart, literally.

We were invited to spend an evening at All Nations Camp, a weeklong residential camp on the Crow Creek Sioux Reservation that welcomes children of all races and backgrounds. Our young people from St. James' had been to the camp several times during the week and bonded easily with the Native American children. It was a delight to see all the kids having fun together; their connection was natural and without pretense. No sooner had I settled in my place around the campfire when a little Native American girl dropped in beside me out of nowhere. "Hi!" she said in a sweet, happy voice. She smiled and her eyes twinkled. She caught me completely by surprise. It's not often that a child willingly approaches and initiates conversation with an adult she has never met before, especially one of a different race. We started to talk and, just as quickly as she had arrived, the little girl was off to retrieve a gift for me. She returned with some sage that she had picked and tied together earlier that day when the children were learning about native traditions.

Sage is an herb that Native Americans have used for centuries in sacred rituals. It is often used for healing and, when burned, is believed to surround a person with protection. I was deeply moved by this gift from my new, little friend. I was also impressed by her desire to share something so meaningful, and by the ease and pleasure with which she offered this gift from her own collection. She truly wanted me to have that bundle of sage that she had personally gathered and bound. I thanked her and told her how special her gift is to me – and it really is. She smiled even more broadly knowing that I was pleased. I asked if she could tell me her name. "Chan'te," she replied. I asked if her name means something special in Lakota and she told me that Chan'te means heart. With that, she asked for a hug and a picture of us with her camera, as if we had known each other for a very long time, not just a few minutes. And I realized how aptly named this child is because of her genuine affection and generosity.

I hope very much to see Chan'te again, perhaps next year at camp if she comes again. In reality, it's not likely that our paths will cross again, and that makes me sad. Instead, I focus on knowing that Chan'te gave me another gift that will last even longer than the compelling fragrance of her sage. Chan'te gave me the gift of her example – in her loving innocence, she embodied the attitude with which we are called to serve. Chan'te gave of herself and from all that she had, with joy, sincerity, and no strings attached. I

believe this is what Jesus was referring to when he taught us to receive the kingdom of God as a little child.

For one so young, Chan'te probably wasn't aware of the wisdom in her sweet demeanor – that's what made her so profoundly innocent. Here was a little sprite who not only offered lovely sage (the herb), she was sage (wise). Chan'te truly gave from the heart and I will never forget her. I will try to meet her example.



Source: <http://media.cleveland.com/plain-dealer/photo/2011/03/9368494-standard.jpg>

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

March 31, 2013

“Life with Jesus”

A few weeks ago Loraine and I brought Billy into our life. He is a 3-year-old Australian Shepherd that weighs about 45 pounds. Needless to say, Max and Jewel (our cats, whom you have seen on St. Francis’ Day) are not overly enthused. Bringing a dog into our life has required a number of changes. Walkies at 5 am. Our vigilance to eliminate his ‘marking’ his territory in the house. Carving time out for play. Taking Billy into our plans as we consider going and doing anything. As you might imagine, Billy is learning to live with us, and we are learning to live with him.

This is not unlike when we choose to bring Jesus into our lives. Make no mistake – there is no doubt that Christ is always with us. I refer to when we open our hearts and our lives to bring Jesus into our lives as Lord ...Savior ...Redeemer. I refer to when we truly allow God to have control in our lives.

“Alleluia! Christ is Risen!” is our proclamation throughout Easter, with the response that “The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!” As we respond our lips are bringing Jesus into our lives. As we respond, are we also proclaiming from our heart of hearts? How do we bring Jesus into our lives, into our very core of being?

We celebrate the Risen Christ throughout Easter and at all times. Just like learning to live with Billy, we also learn to love with Jesus. This is not a one-time occasion. It is not static and steady. Nor is it always predictable and routine. Our life with Jesus is a loving, growing, evolving relationship. We need to always be looking for increasing how we love Christ, as individuals as well as Community.

As we grow with Christ during this Easter season, take your lessons of what you learned from Lent and continue to grow in love with Jesus. What a wonderful time to continue love and serve based on those lessons. Or, if we were not as successful in our Lenten disciplines as we might have wanted, build on those lessons as well.

It is when we proclaim that the Lord is risen indeed in our words, in our hearts, in our minds, in our actions: it is in all these things together that we make the love of God known in this world. That is learning to love together with Jesus Christ.

*your servant in Christ,
dcn. terry*

The **JOY** Corner
O
Y

August 2013

By Deacon Karen Buker

When we have bread left over on Sundays I have been taking it over to St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church. Just inside the outside doors before one reaches the interior doors to the church is a big wooden box structure with a sign that reads... FOOD FOR ST. VINCENT DE PAUL. This is where I place the bread. At the time I come, they are still having Mass. So no one really knows "my coming and my going" (it says this somewhere in the Bible).

Anyway, this past Sunday, after I had dropped the bread off and was walking out of the church and back to my car, a man that was in the parking lot of St. Rita's came over to me and said, "Reverend (I had my collar on) you must be the one who gives us the bread. We always wondered who it was!"

He proceeded to tell me the different places they thought it might have come from. I explained to him that I was the deacon from St. Peter's Episcopal Church and that we had a Covenant with St. Rita's. Then I said the bread was what was left over from what a lady brings from Pick and Save.

I gather that he was from St. Vincent because there was a big truck behind him. He told me how grateful he was and how many places the bread was distributed. He said sometimes they don't get bread and they need it and all of a sudden there is this big bag of bread at St. Rita's.

I don't remember if I got the man's name or not, but I will never forget the kind face, nor the sentiments that came forth between us. I was just so astounded by this revelation!

After thought rolled through my head later. With a few loaves of bread, how many thousands have we fed without even knowing it? Jesus said, "I am the bread of life". Have we followed Jesus and given someone life-giving bread? We may never know the far-reaching effects one tiny act of kindness or compassion can bring!

So I say, "BRING IT ON!!!"

Paul's Friends: **A Faith-based Support Group for Friends and Family of an Incarcerated Loved One at James Place, Waukesha, WI**

By Dick Fox, Deacon

Recently, staff at James Place surveyed a sample of churches in the Waukesha area asking if the clergy or pastoral care ministers knew of members who had a loved one who was, is or will be incarcerated. The results of the research showed that on the average for every 100 persons attending weekend services that there were 4-5 persons who had a loved one who was incarcerated either in jail or in prison.

Based on the results of the survey and experience of clients served at James Place, we felt that we had identified a definite need in the community for ministry. So following the lead of St. Paul (see Philippians 4:14-18) while he was in prison, we established a support group for friends and family who have an incarcerated loved one. Recall that Paul is expressing his appreciation to his friends in Philippi for their support while he was in prison. So after advertising our objectives with local congregations and social service agencies, we established a meeting time and a basic agenda to follow. Now the group meets twice a month for one hour or so and includes sharing, prayer and printed material for the members. Attendance runs from two to ten persons but five is a more typical number for each meeting. There is no facilitator per se but a convener who arranges for a room, nametags and printed materials.

Of course, we especially wanted the group to be built on a faith component but did not want to turn away persons who were not active in a faith community. Building on that idea, we chose to develop guidelines for the group which included anonymity, regular meetings, prayer and inspirational material and emotional support. We learned quickly as the group evolved that there are no experts – neither lay nor professional – on dealing with the emotional fallout from having a friend or family member who has been arrested and incarcerated. It is our intention to provide a safe place for people to express their feelings and frustrations. But one idea seemed to gain prominence – we are just a group of people with similar experiences and frustrations in dealing with an incarcerated loved one and the institutions that provide for their custodial care and programming.

What is it that we have tried to avoid in forming the group? First, we cannot hope to fix the person who is incarcerated. And neither can we fix the person who is related to the loved one – nor should we try. Second, we are careful not to evaluate or criticize the relationship of that group members have with their incarcerated loved one. Third, we encourage members not to dwell in the past or try to anticipate or control the future but to live in the present. Fourth, we recognize that we have no legal authority or technical knowledge about the justice system. We try not to be “jailhouse lawyers”. Fifth, Paul’s Friends is not a therapy group. However, when the need arises, we do offer emotional

support for group members. And we even tolerate an occasional rant or meltdown. But, we don't hold "pity parties". Finally, we reject the notion there must be something wrong with families who have members who break the law or go to jail or prison. This may be the case in some instances but typically it is not true.

In addition to elements we try to avoid, there are resources that we can make available. First, we can offer referrals to agencies in the community or free counseling at James Place. Second, we promote the assumption that all parties must accept responsibility for their own behavior and situation. Self-care is essential. This means that all involved must live with the reality of the situation in which they find themselves and has to be acknowledged as it is. Denial or fanciful thinking is not an option. Third, neither can we always identify the resources needed by the loved one upon release. As a friend or a family member that is a frightening reality. Housing, transportation and employment are difficult problems that the ex-offender faces. But as a result of our own incidental experience, we may be able to suggest things that have worked for us. It is a given that the correctional system often does not do a very good job in helping the incarcerated individual to transition back into the community. Fourth, another idea that is reinforced is that members are reminded that they are not alone in this dilemma. Usually, there is the benefit of much experience in the group regarding understanding how corrections operates, accessing community resources and dealing with the prejudices and challenges that exists in the community for ex-offenders once he/she is released.

Finally, in a nutshell, the purpose of Paul's Friends is to encourage members to pursue good emotional self-care, to rely on their faith and spiritual tools for support and to recognize the small incremental steps that our loved one may be making toward health and return to life outside the walls. We have learned that there are no experts in dealing with these issues only fellow travelers. To state it simply, we want to be prayerfully present to listen non-judgmentally and to "hold one another's hands" during the frustration, anger, guilt and helplessness that typically occurs as a result of our common experience with the justice system and the incarceration of a loved one.

Note: James Place is an Outreach Ministry sponsored by Elmbrook Church and is located in a storefront in downtown Waukesha. It is a Christ-centered, non-profit agency that serves all manner of persons who have issues dealing with addiction, unemployment, physical and mental health and/or housing.

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

October 31, 2012

“Hope”

Anger. Joy. Hurt. Frustration. Triumph. Confusion. Pain. Jubilation. Despair. Abandonment. Gladness.

While you may be assuming that I am describing the feelings and emotions of the people of St. James, (which may include any or all of the above – and more) my purpose is to bring your focus to Jesus. After all, Jesus experienced all of these things – especially during the week that led to his crucifixion. Jesus is as human as every one of us, and understands what it means to have these experiences.

Amidst all of this, the central message that Jesus gave to his disciples was one of hope. And that is the central message that Jesus gives to us today is hope. God calls us to be a people of hope.

This does not mean the perception many have today of hope – which is more of a passive perspective that one wishes for something and then hopes that God will see fit to make it so. (In our culture this should not be surprising. Consider how much we teach and reinforce this type of hope in our children by encouraging them to hope that Santa will grant their Christmas wishes.) Christian hope is not something Jesus grants us in response to our actions.

At the same time our hope is Christ’s kingdom, which is not where we can be passive. God’s love is primarily expressed to God’s people through us. To partially quote Teresa of Avila, God has no face on earth but ours. Just as we have learned hope and love from Jesus and passed down to us through the ages from the disciples, we at St. James’ are called to share the hope of Jesus in our lives. We are a people of hope.

You may be feeling any/all of the feelings and emotions mentioned above. That is normal. I pray that you are also feeling hope – just as Jesus did during that final week in Jerusalem. We live and move and have our being amidst many people who also feel some/all of these feelings and emotions – yet they do not know hope. That is why you are so important. This is a call to action. When you know hope even when experiencing these things, you are called to share it. That is our mission as individuals. That is our mission as St. James’ community.

We are a people of hope.

A Reflection on the Wisconsin Criminal Justice System

By Deacon Bob Bagley

This year the Racine Interfaith Coalition joined with the other affiliates of WISDOM around the state to begin a new three-year program to transform the criminal justice system in Wisconsin. We are working to have safer, healthier and more just communities by seeking to reduce the Wisconsin prison population by fifty percent to 11,000 inmates by the end of the year 2015.

The present criminal justice system spends too much (\$1.3 billion) to warehouse non-violent offenders (along with others who are disruptive and violent) and too little on restoring and rehabilitating convicted felons with underlying addiction and mental health issues that either cause or aggravate the behavior for which they were incarcerated initially.

Wisconsin has 36 adult correctional facilities with an operating capacity of 17,600 inmates. Currently approximately 22,000 inmates are housed in secure state run prisons. It costs \$32,000/year to keep an individual in prison. By comparison, the cost of attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison is estimated at \$18,000/year. The vast majority of prisoners are eventually released back into the communities from which they came. They return with many of the same underlying problems that contributed to their sentencing in the first place.

Also over half of all Wisconsin state prisoners are African American. Convicted non-violent African Americans are imprisoned at much higher rates than their Caucasian counterparts.

Our neighboring state, Minnesota, has an equivalent total state population, but has a prison population that is more than 50% smaller than Wisconsin. Their corrections budget is also less than half of our state's. The difference? Minnesota treats the underlying addiction and mental health needs of its non-violent felons in the local community and without the cost of housing, feeding and guarding them.

The RIC workgroup has begun to understand this complex issue by meeting with law enforcement, social service and justice system professionals in Racine County. We are learning how the complex criminal justice system functions in our community.

Join us if this issue concerns you. The work has just begun.

Deaconspeak

By Deacon Terry Garner

April 30, 2013

“Jesus Knows”

When I talk with God, I offer up many thanks. That is because I have more blessings than I can ever acknowledge to give thanks for. (Please forgive my grammar.) Even so, when I truly consider the thanks I offer back to God, I often confess that these two simple – yet vastly underused – words are woefully inadequate to express my heart. Thank you! It is the most I can offer to God, even if it feels like I am barely scratching the surface of what my heart wants to express. God tells me that it is only important that I offer those thanks. Jesus knows!

It is exactly the same with expressing my thanks to you – the St. James’ community. You are the body of Christ. You have formed me, laughed with me, cried with me, rejoiced with me, mourned with me, prayed with me, played with me, studied with me, eaten with me, fasted with me, and called me to serve you as an icon of Christ. It is because of the presence of the Spirit in you that I am the person I am today. Jesus knows!

This is my final deaconspeak column. I do not say goodbye or farewell because you are always with me. I will miss being in the midst of you. We may be separated by time and/or distance, but what is that to God? Jesus knows!

And so I offer, with an inadequate expression for the gratitude my heart feels but is the best that I give to God, Thank you. Jesus knows!

*Your Servant in Christ – Always,
terry*

Draw Near to Me

Reflections for Lent & Other Seasons

Offered by Deacons of the
Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee



Ash Wednesday • March 5, 2014

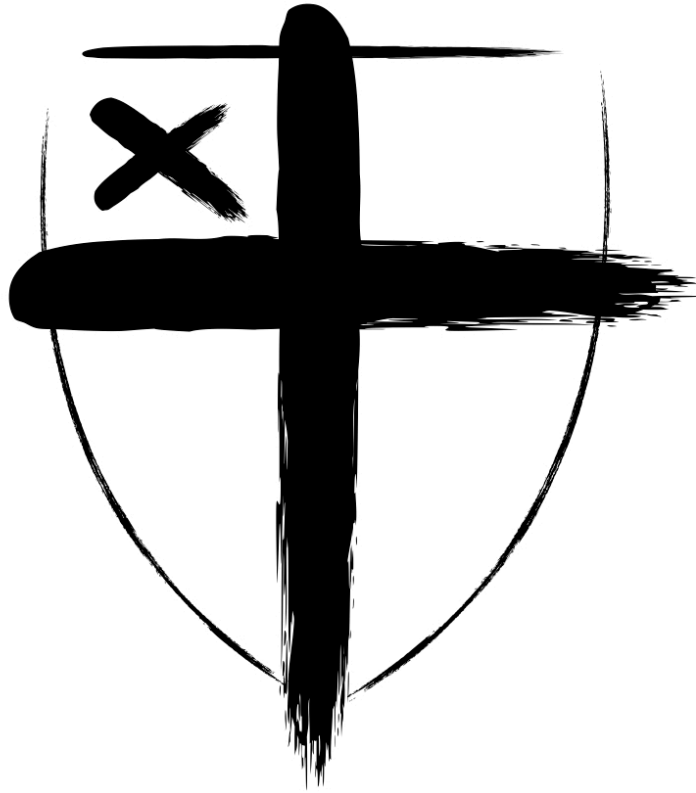


Image source: <http://www.gracepaducah.net/2012/02/21/lenten-offerings/>