

Good Advice

Proper 22, Year B, RCL. Philippians 3:4b-14. The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. October 2, 2011. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Last Sunday I preached on my favorite Bible passage, which was from the chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians that precedes today's reading. Today I'm preaching on the favorite passage of the priest who, I've come to realize, helped me find the direction in life that finally led to my being ordained.

I wish I could take the advice this passage gives—I mean take it to the hilt, as it deserves to be taken. That advice boils down to one thing: The one thing worth striving for is to answer God's call in Jesus. The rest is distraction, or as Paul calls it, rubbish. Paul could be uncomfortably intense, but I think he meant what he said.

So: cling to nothing; move forward as God calls in Jesus.

Man, that is easy to say. Just a few words on a page. But it is hard to do, because if you do it everything but your relationship with Jesus becomes peripheral.

Peripheral. On the edge, outside the central zone. Whatever is toward the center of our lives is what we tend to worship, that is, we put our faith in it for help, comfort and ultimate meaning in life. Since all humans tend to do that to some extent, and since worshipping anything other than God is idolatry, we all have idols that we hold on to, keeping God farther out toward the periphery.

And even God can be kept in the idol zone, if we cling to him for comfort and security to the exclusion of mission, that is, going forth to do something for the life of the world. That's what I was preaching about last Sunday; the first sin Jesus refused in becoming incarnate was idolatry. He refused to cling to his status as God, refused to make that the primary thing.

I think the thing we are most afraid of in taking this advice—let go of everything but our call to be on mission for Jesus—is that we'll be seen as fanatics (and look that way to ourselves). We're afraid we'll put ourselves on the periphery of human activity. Well, yeah, that kind of is what's involved in not being worldly, because worldliness has idolatry at its center. But a lot of what God's call requires us to give up is simply stuff that is holding us back: appetites, possessions, and desire for power and status.

Now, I've known some of those people who take this passage (and the rest of the Bible, which supports it) very seriously and do their level best to make it real. And you know what? They are pretty uplifting to be around. Challenging, too, but... You'd think they would be disconnected from other people. They are not. Take Father Chester Michael, the priest I know whose favorite passage this is. He can see straight into your heart. That's unsettling but, ultimately, helpful. When I was around him he was jolly, though he could be stern when necessary. He did not *like* being stern; he liked being encouraging and generous. He enjoyed a meal and a glass of wine, but he never overate or drank too much. He had a nice little Toyota and he had books and articles all over his little bungalow in the woods, but everything he owned he needed to do his job as a spiritual director, a retreat leader, and a writer on the life of faith.

I finally figured out that Father Michael had come to closely resemble the Person whose heavenly call he kept stretching himself to answer. And in these, my later years, I have come to understand that *that* is “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” that St. Paul is talking about. It's not heaven, though that's what most people think; it's transformation into Christ likeness. By following Jesus with joy and consistency you take on so much of his life that you become like him while being ever more truly yourself.

Becoming like Jesus does not mean you lose your identity. It means that your identity loses its idolatrous dependencies. Heaven knows I have a ways to go along that road! But my heart is higher, my hope stronger, my feet lighter on the path because I know it works. I've seen it, in my own life and in other lives Christ has touched—although, like Like St. Paul, I'm reluctant to claim too much in the way holy achievement for myself.

All dithering aside, do I take (however imperfectly), and do I recommend to others, the advice contained in our reading from Philippians? You bet, because I take Jesus for my Lord and Savior and friend. What that means is, step by step, I walk away from whatever would hold me back from God. Though, sad to say, I do look back, and that impedes my progress. But Jesus will have me nowhere other than by his side at his Father's table in the Kingdom of Heaven, so, in the end, that's where I'll be. I expect to see the rest of his friends there, and his friends are my friends.

So, friends in Christ, support one another in pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. It takes a whole congregation to work out its salvation with fear and trembling—to leave that comfort zone I talked about last Sunday and do the work of God's kingdom. Be joyful and encouraging mostly, stern only as necessary, and leave behind whatever holds you back. It's easier if we do it together. And it's possible because God's call is steady and his love is vast.