



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

December 13, 2009

Advent 3C

By the Reverend Donna Barr

This morning at St John's we celebrate and commission six pastoral care ministers in our parish. We have been studying and preparing and praying for this service of ministry for over a year. I believe that each of these persons has been called by God to serve him and our community. These faithful Christians are living out Jesus' commandment to follow him, loving one another as he has loved us. They know to whom they belong - to Jesus Christ - but they also know that they cannot claim to be a Christian unless they themselves are ministers to our broken world. Christ, himself, put on the clothing of a servant and washed the feet of his followers. He knew that wisdom and words were not enough and so he engaged, in what I call, an acted parable. This parable has shown us how to bring his love and compassion to a person who is hurting or in need of care.

Paul's letter to the Philippians gives our ministers hopeful words to live by today. Because God is intimately present in every moment of life, urging us toward healing relationships and pointing us toward faithful witness, we can experience God's shalom, God's dynamic wholeness, in every situation. As Isaiah proclaims, "surely God is our salvation, I will trust and not be afraid." And Paul adds, if you follow the practices of relationship with our intimate God, "the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ."

Like a good teacher, Paul not only shares a vision, but also presents us with a way to the experience of God's peace, wholeness, and beauty in all circumstances. "Rejoice in God always; again I will say, Rejoice," he begins his letter. First be gentle... .. "let your gentleness be known to everyone, for God is near. Surely gentleness involves a commitment to treat everyone as Christ. In the spirit of the Benedictines, we can see Christ everywhere, because Christ *is* everywhere. Gentleness is the commitment to give God a world of beauty and goodness, by loving our neighbor . . . by pausing before a hurtful remark, by listening to her or his story, by seeing the other in her or his best light and inner goodness, rather than in terms of our ego and defensiveness. We can begin

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*Established in 1847*

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the path of gentleness simply by changing our language to that of gratitude, care, and welcome, and even in conflict, speaking quiet words, "I" statements, and asking questions, rather than demanding answers or making accusations.

Second, Paul calls us to pray in all circumstances. "In everything by prayer and thanksgiving with supplication, let your requests be known to God." Pray your tears, pray your fears...pray with each breath, pray when you pick up the phone or send an e-mail . . . pray before you visit....pray before you speak.... Give thanks...for this beautiful day . . . . for this parish . . . for new ideas . . . for a kind word . . . pray for the opportunity to grow through difficult experiences. As long as you pray, you're not alone, nor are you hopeless . . . prayer connects us with a well-spring of possibilities, divine insights, and the energy to bring goodness to ourselves and others.

Today I give thanks for these devoted Christians whom I have had the privilege to work with this year. These disciples have no doubt about the value of their ministry; they have no hesitation about the relevance of their action. They can do nothing other than speak about the love they have witnessed and received in their giving. Since Jesus Christ is our true life, our true concern, our true compassion our attention is on him. And when things get tough and difficulties arise, as they will, remember that God is near and God is here...in this place, in your heart, in your acted parable. Trust God's promises, practice gratitude, gentleness, and spiritual affirmations, and "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" will be yours.

**In closing, I have taken some liberties with a beautiful poem written  
by Ann Weems.**

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons. The human and the Holy meet in Bethlehem or in a hospital room or at the local pub or at Taylor Manor for Christmas comes like a

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golden storm on its way to Jerusalem – determined, inevitably.....Even now it comes in the face of hatred and warning – no atrocity too terrible to stop it, no Herod strong enough, no hurt deep enough, no curse shocking enough, no disaster shattering enough. For the acted out parable of Christ will be our pastoral care mission and then someone on earth will see the star, someone will hear the angel voices, someone will run to Bethlehem, someone will know peace and goodwill: and then Christ will be born! *Amen*

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