

Pentecost Season A (080713)  
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Genesis 25.19-34  
Psalm 119.105-112  
Romans 8.1-11  
Matthew 13.1-9

...those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.  
(Romans 8.11)

For the greater part of my life I have been fascinated with American religion, particularly American Christianity. My fascination began long before I ever went to seminary or into holy orders. There are some things in our faith that I simply love to explore. At times I have been awestruck by the variations and differences in the ways we express our faith. I have listened with spellbound attention as the Primitive Baptists beautifully sang their shape note music in an *a cappella* fashion because to use instruments in singing the praises of God would have been a sin.

I have spent much time with Christian fundamentalists to whom I love and to whom am frequently attracted. On the campus of a major fundamentalist university I have observed at how the people lived and acted. With rapt attention as I appreciated the devotion with which they valued their faith.

I have been captivated by eccentricities such as those found in small Pentecostal churches in East Tennessee where venomous snakes are handled as a test of faith. Because of their literal interpretation of the last twelve verses of the final chapter of Mark's gospel, snake handling has become a prominent part of their worship.

I have been enraptured by the majesty of Greek Orthodox worship to the extent that I almost thought I was in the realms of heaven.

I have been enthralled by so-called Christian and non-Christian cults, and cults within Christian churches that exact strange and sometimes immoral requirements of their followers – requirements that I think would be far beyond anything our Lord Jesus would want from them.

But perhaps more so than any other subject, I have been interested in those whom many in my evangelical camp of Christianity would view as being outside of the acceptable norm. I have loved to see how they can develop rational and not-so-rational systems of belief and theology.

During one of the most conservative phases of my life I became fascinated to the point of being mesmerized by a leading contemporary liberal theologian named Paul Tillich.

While in college I read everything I could find by this German Lutheran theologian. I am not quite sure why, but maybe I did what so many of us do when we look at God through the excessively tight blinders of our religion. Maybe I looked for evidence of the heresy that would surely be the sign of evil. And yes, of course, I could always find that for which I was looking.

Paul Tillich could write and write he did. Page after page and book after book, he wrote. He wrote thick, very thick books.

But then one day I found one of his smallest books: *The Courage to Be*.<sup>1</sup> I almost passed this book up because I believed that a book by Tillich which was so small could not possibly have any significance. When finally I did begin to read the book, something began to happen to me. Paul Tillich's words touched something in me that no other contemporary writer had ever touched. Paul Tillich helped me to see what the Apostle Paul was trying to tell the early Christians at Rome and still today attempts to tell us: find the courage within yourself to become the person whom God in Christ has called you to be. Allow that person of God to be called out from within your very being. In the epistle lesson for today Paul wrote:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.<sup>2</sup>

We live in an age of heightened anxiety. Anxiety is that painful uneasiness of mind and spirit when we fear that something, usually not a good something, is about to happen to us.

Some of us have been led to believe that because we have experienced phenomenal advances in technology, medicine and the proliferation of education that all the reasons for our anxiety as individuals, as a church and as a nation should be annihilated. Yet then along comes the likes of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the mortgage bust and now another oil crisis. It is obvious that the anxiety lives on. Because of these heart-stopping and attention-grabbing events, our personal and corporate anxiety lives on and seems to self-perpetuate with a life of its own.

Therein is our challenge. The challenge is often directed toward the question of who we are – but not only who but also whose we are. To whom do we belong? What is our spiritual reality in this time of crisis? Can we follow the right rules and thus work our way out of the angst of anxiety?<sup>3</sup> I don't believe we can.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale: New Haven), 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8.11, *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI) 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Halsall, *The Courage to Be, 1952*, Modern History Sourcebook: Paul Tillich (Fordham University: 1997)  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1952tillich.html>

I think that this is a good time to think about the relationships we have at Galilee Church, our church, and the interim process – the one and only reason for which I came to be with you. At this point I have been at Galilee for almost eight months. By my own calculation I think that we are around one-third of the way through the interim period as you move toward the call of a settled rector. This morning I want to spend a few moments thinking about where we've been, where we are and where we need to go.

Last November when I arrived I found a rather warm and welcoming community that was immersed in a number of anxiety stimulating culture conflicts. At this point you had been through one of the most difficult phases in the life of a congregation that was and is imaginable. I was assured by almost everyone that you were intent upon working toward building up your Christian community. People told me that we needed to get beyond what the various groups wanted so we could see and become what God wants us to become.

Many told me that because of the individuality within the congregation that you had forgotten how to be the body of Christ. Thusly you were trapped by the paralysis of action and had not been able to move forward. It is not necessarily important to know why it happened, but just to know that it happened.

And so at that point we began to move forward, together we began to move forward. We began to rebuild a Christian education program, and look for the staff and volunteers we would need to give our people the foundations of the faith that they need. We set off to train people who are involved in lay ministry and give them the rudimentary skills they need to be ambassadors of Christ whether they are at the bedside, at the lectern or in a classroom. We have tried to find new and innovative ways to make the church work and function as it needs to work and function. In the rector search process you have formed a search committee that has begun to work and move in the directions that the vestry wants them to move. Because of the tireless work of so many in this congregation we have begun to rebuild a great deal of what had been lost.

At the same time many of you have been very vocal about the things you like and the things you do not like. The clergy, wardens, and vestry members have invested a considerable amount of time and energy to listen to you. Listening is essential. The listening will continue with the search committee as those dedicated folk work to listen to your inputs about this church and about what you want in a new rector.

In short, our life together is moving ahead. However, this movement is accompanied by a considerable amount of anxiety.

Today you have the opportunity to find your spiritual center and flourish. On the other hand, you also have the capability end up like the city of Jerusalem over which Jesus wept. Jesus, from the depth of his humanity, looked over the city of Jerusalem that would ultimately be destroyed, and he wept.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 19.41, *Ibid*.

The good news from God is that there is a way forward. That way is to get close, very close to Paul's admonishment to the early Christians in Rome. Galileans, you are called to have Christ's spirit dwelling within you. You are called to find the courage to be what God has called you to be.

Jesus summed up our call to being quite well. It really is very simple. When asked by one of the scribes, and you will remember this story, which commandment is the greatest, Jesus replied:

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The Second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.<sup>5</sup>

Galileans, God has set you free to be what God has called you to be. Yes, it will take courage to be what God has called you to be, because that calling is to be more than you are today.

It will take courage because:

God may be calling you venture beyond the place where things are comfortable and familiar.

God may be calling you to a place where you may be afraid to go.

God may be calling you to do things that you have even said you would not do.

And how do I know that it will take courage to go into the unknown? Just about one year ago I was convinced that I would not accept the call to come to this church. I was convinced that I could say "no" to God. I was wrong. God said "come" and I did.

From time to time God does that with God's people. Into the unknown and unfamiliar God called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Into the unknown and unfamiliar God called the Apostle Paul. And now God calls you. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 12:29-31, *Ibid.*