

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 8, 2008

The Very Reverend Kathleen Bobbitt

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 6/8/08 Galilee

“For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

When I served as Priest-in-charge of a church in Northern Virginia, I received numerous emergency phone calls from a particular parishioner I'll call Mike. Most of the calls came from the emergency room at Fairfax Hospital and later from two out of state Centers for the Treatment of Drug and Alcohol Abuse. Mike couldn't stand himself and each time he lost control of his life he abused alcohol to the point of needing hospitalization. This occurred over and over again.

When I read the passage from Matthew I am reminded of something I read several years ago that applies to Mike and to many who abuse their bodies with drugs and alcohol. The Executive director of the Betty Ford Center for the Treatment of Drug and Alcohol abuse made the following statement:

“Patients stop thinking of themselves as bad people who need to be better and start realizing they are sick people who can get well.”

That statement serves as an excellent description for what the Church ought to be. For it describes how Jesus dealt with people. Jesus didn't treat people as evil or bad. He knew they were people in need of love, forgiveness, and hope. This is the kind of medicine Jesus gave.

One of my seminary professors, Jim Green, used to say that church is a hospital for sick people. We laughed the first time we heard that statement. But the truth is, it's true. He saw sick people who could, with God's help and love, get well.

And so it is for The Church. Galilee isn't a place for the holy and pure. It's a place for the sinful and the weak. Galilee isn't a place where the parishioners have arrived at saintliness. Church with a capital C is a place for those who are not perfect. We don't come to church because we feel better than others

and have left all our badness behind. We are here because we are sinful people who desperately need love and forgiveness.

When I was a seminarian the students were required to visit at least 4 churches and decide on a church to spend the last two years of seminary working in what is called a Field Work Assignment. I visited several churches and began the interviewing process to pick the place where I could learn and contribute. After visiting churches our small groups at seminary would gather to share our experiences. In one particular church I visited I met the priest after the service and she asked me to come for an interview, which I did, and it went very well. We connected. She asked if I would return the following night to meet with three vestry members, which I did. In this interview I was asked *“When did you accept Jesus Christ as your savior and were saved from all your sin?”* This was unfamiliar language to me. But I answered the question as honestly as I could: *“I was saved at my baptism and I wake up every day and start all over again trying to follow Jesus’ teachings. For me it isn’t a one-time deal.” I didn’t get the job!* Later classmates said, *“You should have said you were saved on January 15, 1985. That’s what they wanted to hear.”*

One of the beautiful parts of our liturgy on Sunday mornings is saying the confession of faith in community with everyone in the congregation.

Worship needs to include the recognition of who we are. We are people who have broken relationships with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves. We are people who have *“sinned against God and our neighbor in thought word and deed,”* We are among the sick, the broken, the angry, and we know that we need God’s healing grace. That is the first step in getting well. And that is why each AA meeting starts with going around the room to introduce themselves saying, hi, I’m Mike and I’m an alcoholic.

So in the church we come before God admitting our needs. God help me!
The Church is not bad people who need to shape up, but sick people who, with forgiveness, get well. The Church is a hospital where God's grace is the healing agent among the sick. The church exists to invite the tax collectors and sinners into its doors. This is the mission given to us when we are invited to follow Jesus. Our mission is to extend to others the same grace, which has been given to us through the love and forgiveness of Jesus. This is the task of the Church and this community on Pacific Avenue. This is the hospital of God, a place where we sick sinners can, with Christ's love, get well.

There are many paths to the realization that you need to lead a Christ centered life. For me it was gradual. Fortunately St. Paul did much of the work for me when he was struck blind on the road to Damascus. For many of us we were baptized, confirmed, and led a Sunday centered sort of Christian life. We probably went through periods when religion and church weren't very important. But some event, say the birth of a first child, begins what I'll call the upward climb that culminates in a commitment to serve God's church.

Sin is a sickness we all share. We have to get down on our knees every Sunday and ask God, through his son to heal us, again.

Whether or not Mike connected with his church again I do not know. But he belongs in the church. Because this is who the church is – not bad people who need to shape up, but sick people who, with forgiveness, get well.

Thanks be to God. Amen