

Year B, 1st Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord
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Happy New Year! Of course for the church our new year began with the First Sunday of Advent on December 3, 2017. The conflict of the calendars is brought into full light on two occasions this year. Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day, and Easter falls on April 1, also known as April Fool's Day. These comical coincidences highlight a very real tension between cultural time and God's time.

As 21st Century Christians we are pulled in two directions, one towards the world and one towards God. Come February 14 how will we juggle ashes and roses? Will you plan now to receive your ashes in the morning so you can also honor whatever Valentine traditions you may share with your beloved? Such cultural traditions are important; so are ashes and everything symbolized therein.

This dichotomy is not always so clean-cut. We still live in a time where the calendar still reflects the birth of Jesus. It is the year of our Lord, *anno domini* 2018. For many this is simply 2018; that is to say the number is disembodied, no longer connected to the birth of Jesus. For baptized Christians, Jesus is our reference point for everything, from chronological time to baptism.

As we hear in the lessons, not all baptisms are alike. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul encounters some disciples who were baptized into John's baptism. Paul responds saying, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus" (Acts 19:5). In other words, John's baptism was preparatory. Christian baptism is all encompassing and has very real implications for us who have the audacity to call ourselves Christians.

The Saints of the church model for us Christian living and righteous witness. Sometimes, however, we can feel a disconnect between saints of old and the world we inhabit. Worldly temptation is nothing new, but we are right in observing that today's temptations, particularly with technology added to the mix, can feel relentless. How do we know we're on the right track?

In his Letter to the Christians in Galatia, St. Paul offered what is now commonly known as the fruits of the spirit. Such fruits indicate the mark of Christian living in individual and corporate life. These are the markers that one is on the right path, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23a)."

Given St. Paul's reputation for being irascible, now is a good time to remind you that no one is expecting you to master all nine qualities; although it's good to be aware of those where we fall short and work on those areas.

Such reflection highlights the importance of community. In a community of faith, in a church like St. Martin's, I don't have to master *all* Christian qualities; perhaps I'm good at one or two. Through these qualities I can enrich the community by offering my gifts and so build up the church. At the same time the necessary work on my shortcomings is perhaps that much easier because I don't have the sense that I'm trying to merely do self-improvement on my own. What I do is for the building up of the church.

Just by way of example I want to tell you about my recently deceased friend Tom Meagher. Tom was a faithful 8 o'clock parishioner here at St. Martin's for the past ten years or so, but I knew him much longer than that. I knew Tom from my tenure at Holy Comforter, which began in 1998. I would attribute to him the marks of kindness and faithfulness. On the kindness side of the equation I experienced him in this way. He once noticed that the wooden cover to the baptismal font had become faded and worn. He asked if he could take it home and refurbish it. Several weeks later it returned completely restored. It was actually better than new. Tom also loved the outdoors and baseball and knew I did too and that these were things I enjoyed sharing with my boys. He once gave me a homemade widgeon whistle. As for baseball, he and his wife Audrey were regulars at St. Martin's baseball games. I think it was a way to take in some baseball but also a way to in which we got to know each other better as we visited between pitches.

As to faithfulness, he rarely missed a Sunday but for health concerns in his last few years. The reason he found his way to St. Martin's was because we had an 8 o'clock service. He loved Holy Comforter, but once their early service became a Katrina casualty, he moved to us to avoid the background noise of a typical 10 o'clock service. His hearing couldn't manage. So he found another way to express his faithfulness. And even in the end when his eyesight prevented him from driving here, he would attend the Roman Catholic Church with his wife. But once a month there was a tap on the door and it was Tom, dropping off his offering envelopes. Those envelopes were important symbols of his connectedness to the wider church and his place in a particular community of faith.

Yesterday we buried Tom from St. Martin's Church. It was a beautiful service. First and foremost it was a service of worship that conjured up the implications of being a baptized Christian who has now gone to his reward.

I tell you of these things for a couple of reasons. Tom was for me a gentle man of iron determination expressing a faithful Christian life. He was also someone who enriched my life and the life of our community by making himself known, by giving of himself. Tom knew where he came from and where he would ultimately go. In between birth and death he had a wonderful life. His dedication to his Christian faith provided for him a grounding. In turn that led to a peacefulness that cannot be attained by chasing the winds of the world. Such peace can be realized by prioritizing the faith of our baptism instead of that which pulls against God. *Amen.*