

Feast of Martin of Tours  
November 11, 2018  
The Rev. Fred Devall

Our Parton Saint, Martin of Tours, did not begin life in the church but rather as an officer in the Roman Cavalry. While serving in northern France, Martin encountered a half-clothed beggar, freezing in the street. Having already given away his money, Martin cut his cloak in two and gave it to the man. That night, in a dream, Martin encountered the beggar again, but this time the beggar had the face of Christ. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matt. 25:37-40). This unfolding of events is summarized beautifully by artist Steve Wilson in the mosaic that now hangs in our narthex.



*Martin Encountering the Beggar Mosaic*

Martin was baptized, left the military, and was ordained a priest. Martin did not set out to become a saint. Truth be told he wanted to stay in his monastery and pray, but God had other plans for him. God's plan for Martin unfolded not through some complicated matrix that required deep problem solving to unlock. Rather the plan became manifest as Martin went about doing the basics of Christian teaching. He gave clothing to a naked man, and in so doing he encountered Christ himself.

We have a local saint you may not be aware of- Frances Joseph Gaudet; her feast day on the church calendar is December 30. Like Martin, France Gaudet did not start out to become a saint. She simply started out as a Methodist woman advocating for prison reform. Born in Mississippi in the year 1861, the daughter of a native American mother and an enslaved father, through local relatives she found her way to New Orleans. Once here she was appalled to learn that juveniles were being detained in the same prison as grown men. When she appealed to the courts to rectify the situation, they released the boys to her care. Consequently she built an industrial arts school for African-American children; schools at that time were still segregated. As time unfolded and Gaudet aged, she sought assurances that her work with orphans would continue. The Episcopal Church agreed and she donated the 105 acres of school and farm to the church in 1919. The church continued her legacy of caring for children of color through the Gaudet home until 1966 when construction of the new Interstate cut through the property on Gentilly Road. The home was sold, and her legacy continues to this day in the form of the Gaudet fund providing educational scholarships to children of color. I mention her here and now for she is yet another saint, like Martin who began her Christian service doing the basics, in her case caring for orphans and visiting youths in prison.

Clergy often encounter people who are on what might be described as a Vision Quest. Such a journey rightly implies big things ahead, but in the spiritual realm, big plans and big doings rarely materialize out of big steps. Rather I would argue big things arise out of little steps, basic steps. What I'm suggesting is that we often over-think things. If you want to know where God is leading you, get out into the world and give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoners, for when you do these things you are doing them to Christ himself. Those simple acts will unlock an encounter with God that will lead you down pathways you could not have planned, so don't try to plan, just serve; do the basics. Christ is found in the basics.

As you know today is our in-gathering Sunday for Annual Stewardship to fund church mission and ministry in 2019. Although not in this passage, it is clear from any honest reading of the Gospel of Matthew and the wider scriptures that generous giving of money is also one of the basics of Christian living. I invite you to see your financial support of this church beyond just covering the budget. Giving of your income is that, but it could be so much more; perhaps this is the path where you will encounter Christ himself and your life may turn on a simple act of generous giving, but you will never know if you don't take that basic step.

I also want to take our stewardship conversation to a different level beyond just paying to keep lights on. Those lights are on to enable ministry. Through one simple step of language, I feel God leading me down a new path.

Let's go back to the Martin story. The naked beggar that Martin encountered was a homeless man. This may seem obvious, but in all the years that I have been hearing the Martin story, the man he encountered was never called homeless. With this simple turn of phrase I have begun to look differently at the homeless people who walk by and live in the vicinity of our church.

Some live on the street, others in cars. I feel a strong call to minister to them; after all, they are our neighbors, and Christ himself calls us to minister to their needs. What if our stewardship went beyond scribbling a number on a piece of paper that we place in the offering plate? What if it included a plan to meet them? What if we broke bread together through a regular Sunday morning breakfast? My ultimate goal is to work towards a homeless shelter. Why? Well, for starters, there is no homeless shelter in the second most populous parish in the state of Louisiana. Let that sink in. Such a big enterprise isn't going to build itself, but maybe we can get the conversation started if we host a free breakfast between the 8 and 10 o'clock services? In addition to meeting the basic needs of our neighbors a breakfast could also serve as a regular opportunity for us to encounter each other and strengthen the bonds of our community.

I truly believe the entirety of our life in faith, including stewardship of resources, goes back to the basics to the words of Jesus by which you and I will be judged- "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matt. 25:37-40).