

Sermon September 20, 2009 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**The Rev'd Canon Robert G. Riegel****Mark 9:30-37**

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes also the one who sent me.” There is this mysterious and wonderful connection between holding a child and accepting Jesus and being at one with God the Father.

Today we have baptisms. I know at least one person who thought this morning, “Oh, baptisms again, why can’t they have private baptisms like we used to.” But I really love and highly value baptisms. It is because of what we proclaim about these children and it is because it gives me the chance to remember and renew my relationship with a loving God.

And the baptism of infants proclaims a truth that we often miss or forget. The grace of God is given to us unearned and undeserved. These children belong to God’s family not because they believe and confess just the right thing, not because they have earned some place in the world. Who knows what they may be in the future. Do you remember the old jump rope ditty? “Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.” Who knows our children what will be? In part that will be determined by how we hold them, love them, let them go. In part their life with God will be effected by godparents and about how the church welcomes and guides them. For sure they will all be very different. They will go to different schools, follow different political parties, develop different values; they will have all sorts of jobs and professions, yes. But in Baptism they are made one family, God’s family, in which different people can find unity with each other. We proclaim a Christian faith that is not about uniformity, but rather about the unity we experience through one Lord, through one faith, and through one baptism. With faithful prayer and generous stewardship and committed action you and I must do everything in our power to preserve that church family and the church’s God given unity.

The Reverend Furman Buchanan is a priest at St. Martin's in the Fields. In a sermon some weeks ago he reminded me of an important story. William Alexander Guerry was born in Eastover, lived in Charleston and attended the theological school at Sewanee. In 1907, at Trinity Church, now this cathedral, William Guerry was elected bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina. The diocese was still the whole state.

It was a time of tension and fear not unlike our own time. There was anxiety about a new scientific theory by Charles Darwin, strife about developing new liturgies for a new 1928 prayer book, tension about race relations, and fear about the economy and about war. In South Carolina Bishop William Alexander Guerry preached boldly about striving for unity, and not uniformity in the Church. He preached boldly that (quote) "the Church should be broad enough to embrace within its communion...every living soul." He followed this by saying, and I think from this very pulpit, "Dear people of God, it is time we had a black bishop for the Episcopal Church in South Carolina!"

Bishop Guerry's vision of the Church can be summarized in the opening sentences of what we proclaim at a Holy Baptism. There is One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, One God and Father of all. Bishop Guerry wanted all people, regardless of race, to be part of the community of Christ, the family of God in the diocese, and he wanted a black Bishop Suffragan (assistant) to work alongside him to build up the Body of Christ in this state.

Bishop Guerry's dream was never realized. And in 1928, a priest who passionately insisted on the principle of white supremacy walked into the bishop's office in Charleston and shot him. He died several days later, as a martyr—a witness—for the faith. Bishop Guerry preached boldly, not only with his lips, but with his very life.

We don't know yet who the candidates for bishop will be when we gather at Trinity Cathedral this December 12th for election. I pray that the candidates will be men and women who will be eager to proclaim and protect the baptism promise of One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of all. I pray they will insist upon a diocese that

is broad enough to embrace within its communion every living soul; One family of those desiring to be connected to Christ and to each other.

And I hope that today as we embrace these children and proclaim for them and for ourselves the unearned grace and love of God, that we will take seriously the promises we make again in baptism, especially those last three. That you and I by our words and examples will proclaim the Good news of God in Christ. It is not a time for meanness, but a time for great kindness. St. James writing to the troubled early church said this that we heard read this morning. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” The next promises are clear and say an important truth in different ways. That we will seek Christ and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. That we will strive for justice and respect the dignity of every human being.

Those are tough promises. No wonder that we answer, “I will, with God’s help – only with God’s help. But by keeping these promises we will offer a future Church family for these children, a place of love and acceptance and joy and security and peace. We can do this, with God’s help. And in keeping these promises we can bring some sense and sanity to our confused, secular, and warring world. Not easy, but it is the ministry to which God calls everyone of us.

And I will..... with God’s help. Amen

Sources:

1. Sermon by The Rev. Furman Buchanan, St. Martins in the Field, Columbia. Preach on August 23 using Propers 16B
2. Donald Armentrout, “Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop” in *Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South*, Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., eds. 2008, p. 406.