

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST - AUGUST 19, 2007

INVOCATION

*We gather in the name of Love ~
We gather in the name of Wonder ~
We gather in the name of community believing
that all of these are ways to know and worship
You ~ the Creator of all that is Joy and
Mystery. Fill our hearts with the Promise and
Hope that is yours to give as You have been
giving since the beginning of time.*

MORNING PRAYER

God Whose Way of Love Fills Our
Hearts and Minds, God Whose Mystery
and Music Nurtures Our Souls, God
Whose Gentle Presence Satisfies Our
Deepest Longings – help us live your
eternal *Alleluia!* every day we draw
breath. Help us not be afraid to witness
your Love. Help us to not be afraid to
savor the sacred gift of every new day.
In the name of the Living Christ we pray
AMEN

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since
we are surrounded by so great a cloud of
witnesses, let us also lay aside every
weight and the sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race
that is set before us, looking to Jesus the
pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who
for the sake of the joy that was set before
him endured the cross, disregarding its

shame, and has taken his seat at the right
hand of the throne of God.

SERMON

The Burdens of Faith

What are they?

Many of you know we came home
from our vacation at the beach a little
early this year but before that early
departure, we were there long enough
for my family to indulge me with
four glorious days where I was able to
arrive early at the ocean's edge and
leave late.

By *arrive early* and *leave late* I mean
that there were only one or two people
who were there when I arrived and there
were only one or two people there when
I left and each time, they were not the
same people.

It's that constant parade of people
who continually arrive and unpack, set
up in the sand, play and then repack
their stuff in little family dramas all day
long that I consider a valuable part of
my beach experience.

In order to stay so long I have to
pack a lot of stuff of my own. I have my
famous "family tent" ~ a little tarp I set
up to protect me from the sun, chairs
that help define the space, towels, books,
food, shoes, extra clothes... with a day-
long stay, the amount of gear seems to
grow each season ~ so much so that
including every item was becoming too
much for me to handle. And this is a
mild dilemma ~ I feel at least ~ because
every item on my list was all very
necessary for me to be there all day.

This year, in order help get my stuff down to the water, I bought a little cart with those big rubber wheels ~ have you seen those big things? They make it much easier to travel over the sand and indeed, the first day with the cart was a dream.

I loaded my usual gear and went down to the water's edge with no problems.

But then the very next day, and every day after the first one, was difficult all over again. Here's what was happening. I said quietly to myself

*Well ~ that was no problem ~
I'll bet I could add a few more items
to the cart and it would still be easy.*

This meant that every day then became an experiment trying to see how much I could pile on the cart and still be able to say:

That was pretty easy!

I have to admit, each time I piled the cart high, a part of me felt like the old days were better.

In my quest to make things easier, I began to dread each trek down to the water and back. In my desire to make things easier and manageable, I ended up making things harder.¹

I found the same thing has happened in my life with the computer and all the technology I have chosen to use. You see, my cell phone and digital recorder, ipod and laptop computer were all designed to make my life easier

¹ I firmly believe that if I just had about two solid weeks of beach time to experiment, I could find the right balance!

in so many ways, but now my thinking goes like this:

How many of these amazing, time saving devices I can squeeze into my days and still say that my life is easier?

Once again ~ as I worked to gain control and make things easier, the whole process seemed to become so much more cumbersome...

In the life of a Christian, we often try to make things easier in an attempt to control or get a handle on our faith.

We want to be serious about being a Christian and so we think if we could just pray a little better and read the Bible a little more and come to church and teach Sunday School and serve at the Salvation Army and work at the Pantry, be kind to strangers and our neighbors and save the environment and work for world peace then... and maybe then... we will maybe get to the point where we can get a handle on this thing called being a Christian... and of course nothing could be further from the truth.

The truth is that we carry around this baggage of faith, these beliefs that turn into burdens and with each one, we tell ourselves:

*If I work harder and longer and smarter,
then I will be a good Christian, I will finally
be able to say at some point down the road:
I have done a good job and accomplished
what needed to be done...*

...and of course ~ with the way we set things up ~ nothing could be further from the truth.

What we need to do is rest in the promise of God's Eternal Love and be a

little more realistic about all the things we pile on our cart as we head out to the beach. We need to turn our lives over to God and be a little more honest about what we can handle.

As we love our neighbor as ourselves, we need to not be so hard on ourselves.

From that passage I read from Hebrews, the writer is talking about running a race and says before you start:

*lay aside every weight and
the sin that clings so closely*

There are some burdens, some baggage, some overloading that has to be set aside so we can run this race to the finish line.

One thing we might set aside is the need to remember everything in order to get all the details right.

For those of us who are getting older, this will come as good news. We are human beings, we are going to forget. I love the story Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor, tells about a succession of rabbis and how each tried to do as well as the one who had come before.

The first was the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov who saw misfortune threatening the Jews. It was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, saw the Jews threatened again, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the

Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moseh-Leib, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient."

*It was sufficient and
the miracle was accomplished again.*

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.

And it was sufficient.

Elie Wiesel said simple stories like this sustained people year after year in the concentration camps and continue to sustain and hold people's lives together in times of darkness.

The people in the concentration camps could not gather to celebrate their faith, they could not come together to learn and remember together, but their faith was sustained because, in his or her own way ~ each person simply told the story.

As Children of God, we do not have to remember all the details, we simply need to continue to tell the story.

A second thing we might set aside is a need to be perfect in all we do. I believe one of the most depressing translations from the King James Version is the verse where Jesus is

talking in the Sermon on the Mount about all the things a Christian should do and the last line is

Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Well ~ I heard that growing up and remember feeling so disappointed in myself every time I walked out of church.

Perfect, be ye perfect...

Boy ~ that was never going to be me.

It wasn't until college when I came across Clarence Jordan's translation of the same passage where he writes:

Strive to be mature,

just like your Heavenly Father is mature...

Okay ~ now that is something I can work with, at least now I am not shooting for perfection.

There is new television series coming this fall on NBC entitled *Journey* and it's about a man who travels back and forth in time.

Apparently he is not able to control when he goes or where and, as you can imagine, he is pretty confused.

Now understand ~ I have never seen the show, I am just sharing an image from just a few commercials. In any event, somewhere along the way this time traveler guy meets a woman who offers guidance but no real clues about what is happening.

And there is a little exchange that sticks in my mind every time I see the commercial. The time traveling man is lamenting that he does not know what he is supposed to do when he "lands" in a new place and the woman says:

Don't worry ~ just trust yourself.

The Journey man comes right back saying:

But how do I know if I am doing something wrong? I think I am going to make mistakes.

And she says:

You will make mistakes, that's okay. That's part of it.

We all need permission to understand that making mistakes is part of the process. We need to allow ourselves to set down that burden of feeling we always have to get things done perfectly as we strive to be mature ~ as our Heavenly Father is mature...

Finally, as Christians who have made a commitment to be faithful to God's Love, ***we need to set down the burdensome idea that all the work is ours to do alone.*** Feeling we have to do everything all by ourselves will eventually either burn us out or overwhelm us and we give up... maybe those two are the same thing.

Many of you know, as the chaplain of the Painted Post Fire Department, I was called about the motor vehicle accident on I-86 this past Tuesday.

Whenever I am called, I go to the fire station first to check in and await further orders from the Fire Chief.

So when I arrived, I heard that the accident involved children which is always hardest for the first responders.

About two or three minutes later, however, the message came over that there had been a fire, two children had

died and I should come right out to the scene of the accident.

Not knowing any further details, I rushed out to my car and my mind was swimming in all these questions that were overlaid with a rising panic.

What am I possibly going to do to help in this situation?

What am I going to find? How am I going to hold myself together?

When I arrived, I quickly discovered that everyone's worst fears had been realized.

I won't detail the accident here except to say it was a horrific situation and many who responded were stunned in silence. In addition, there was a tremendous frustration at the scene because even those who were the very first to arrive were too late; there was nothing anyone could have done to help except put out the fire, try to calm a very hysterical mother, direct traffic and be on hand while the State Police went through their necessary and painfully slow process of accident investigation.

I moved around and talked to so many people but quickly discovered that it was *not* necessary for me to swoop in and be some kind of "Super Chaplain."

In the process of talking and listening, I watched while everyone else did the same thing ~ they talked and they listened and when people said

I'm okay and don't need to talk...

it was the friends and folks who had been around who listened even more because we all knew everyone had to talk at some point.

In the debriefing the next day, every single firefighter talked about this as one of the hardest calls of his or her career. As each person shared his or her little piece of the story, I began to see how strong this group of volunteers was precisely because no one was trying to do it all.

Each person was handling just what he or she could handle and trusting others to carry the load if someone had to step aside. That sense of community and caring is so important ~ not just in fighting fires ~ but in the church also.

I often smile when people say to me:

I don't need church ~ I can worship God on the golf course or fishing on a river or even walking through the woods.

If I get a chance, I respond by saying: *You're right ~ you can ~ but it is pretty hard to build a loving community in those settings.*

Worship is an important part of our life together but it is only the tip of the iceberg.

A community helps us remember that we do not have to do this thing called Christianity all by ourselves, we can rely on those with whom we are sharing the journey ~ forgiving one another as we sometimes forget the story and make our usual mistakes.

May God's Love only continue to grow for all of our days. AMEN