

Sermon Preached August 31, 2014
Year A, Proper 17
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

After the Baptism of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys!"¹

Although he is not addressing it directly, in the Gospel lesson today Jesus speaks about the responsibilities of baptism, about what it means to be a Christian. He tells his disciples about his upcoming journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer and be killed. The disciple Peter loves Jesus very much and is shocked to learn this news so says to Jesus that this must not happen. He wants Jesus to avoid this terrible thing. In response Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan!" meaning, "Peter, don't you dare prevent this thing from happening!" Jesus knows that terrible as his suffering and death will be, it needs to happen to fulfill his mission. Jesus wants this to happen because of the great good that will come out of it. While Peter's intentions may be honorable, and his inclinations tempting, if they are followed they will prevent the salvation of humanity and all creation. Fortunately, Jesus recognizes this, sees Peter as a tool of Satan, and commands Satan to get out of his way. Jesus is going to

¹ source: <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Baptism#ixzz3Bu61GBJs>

Jerusalem. He knows that going forward with his death, rather than avoiding the journey, is the loving action.

In our baptism service those who come forward for baptism, or their parents and godparents, are asked a series of questions. Two of those questions are “Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?” and “do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?” As Christians we agree to these renunciations because we renounce evil. We choose the good, even if choosing the good is difficult. **To be a baptized Christian entails not only the receiving of grace and the Holy Spirit, it entails responsibilities.** It means we will not choose evil, we will choose to do the right thing, the good thing, even if it is hard. And through our baptism we are given the strength and wisdom to accomplish this.

Look at both Jesus in the Gospel reading and Moses in the Old Testament reading. Both are given daunting tasks by God. Tasks that will cause them great suffering. They both could have been tempted to avoid doing what was asked of them. But they both agreed to do their tasks, because not doing so would have allowed evil to prevail. Moses had fled Egypt and currently had a happy life with wife and kids in Midian. Now with the burning bush, Moses was told he had to go back to Egypt to free his people from slavery. His first answer was “I don’t think I’m your man.” It was too scary and hard a command from God. It involved giving up the things and people he had come to love. But Moses finally did agree because not doing so would have kept the people in slavery. He could not permit that evil to continue. He knew he had to follow God. Choosing to do the good. Choosing the loving

action. Choosing to thwart evil. Choosing to follow the way of God - sometimes entails suffering. Jesus himself said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

To be a baptized Christian means to be a follower of Christ. It means being willing to take up your cross if the need demands. **To be a baptized Christian entails not only the receiving of grace and the Holy Spirit, it entails responsibilities.** It's not only what we get, it's what we give.

I hope everyone has some fun plans for this Labor Day weekend. God willing you will enjoy a last hurrah before the fall season begins in earnest. I plan on spending time outside with the kids to enjoy the weather. Although this holiday weekend is to honor the American worker and those who labor, through cookouts and pool parties, it might be appropriate to also consider the labor of a Christian. Because we are involved in the Labor of Love. What is this Labor of Love you might ask? The passage from Romans is a fabulous example of what this looks like. Consider some of its words: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep... Never avenge yourselves... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This Labor of Love is powerful stuff! It's about living in revolutionary ways. We often hear that being a Christian is all about love, and some dismiss us as pie-in-the-sky happy-clappy idealists. True, we are idealists. We hope for the restoration of creation. However, the love we profess is not some sacchariney kumbaya love, it is love

with teeth. It is love that demands our all. True love is like that. True love hates evil and will oppose it. True love loves the unlovable person. True love serves others. True love knows compassion for those who suffer and works to promote justice. True love means leaving your cushy life in Midian to stand before Pharaoh and demand he release his slaves. True love means going to Jerusalem to die on a cross and save humanity. Being a Christian calls us to this Labor of Love.

There's a great quote from the *Sunday Express* Newspaper in London. It says, "Most people wish to serve God -- but in an advisory capacity only."² But true love means actions as well as words, and sometimes these actions will cause us suffering.

One example of this love is found in a recent USA Today article about Ferguson, "Shortly after Brown's shooting, Rob White, pastor of Peace of Mind Church in St. Louis, and others, organized Clergy United, a group of 200 local clergy that acted as a liaison between police and protesters. The group met with young local residents to discuss the shooting, allowing them to voice their frustrations, and agreed on actions to take during street protests, he said. That greatly defused the actions of protesters.... Bishop Edwin Bass of the Church of God in Christ would talk not just to protesters, urging them to remain resolute but calm, but he also approached members of the Missouri State highway Patrol and St. Louis County Police Department as they struggled to keep the peace. Some allowed him to pray with them."³ Acting as peacekeepers between these two groups cannot be easy, but it is the loving and Christian thing to do.

² <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/service.htm>, 8/30/08

³ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/24/ferguson-protests-peaceful-clergy/14531429/>

And it's not just clergy, but all Christians who are called to step out of our comfort zone and address the issues of our world. Look at the wonderful work done by Episcopal Relief and Development and those who travel around the world healing illness and poverty, or those who founded and support Esperanza Academy in Lawrence, or those who founded and work for the B-Safe program, or those who stand up against discrimination in their communities, or those who, at some cost to themselves, do the right thing wherever they are. In fact, there are many here at St. John's who have chosen the good and taken on a Labor of Love. These are people who are willing to take up their cross and follow Jesus. We all are called to do likewise.

Next Sunday we will baptize three beautiful children into the Body of Christ. Through their baptism they will be given the gifts of grace and the Holy Spirit. They will be welcomed into the priesthood of all believers. They will join with Christ in his death and rise to new life in him. Yet they will also take on the Labor of Love and grow up to engage the world in good and joyful ways, sometimes at their own expense. It's hard to look at these small, sweet children and imagine such weighty tasks ahead of them, but Moses and Jesus too, were once babies, and look what they were called to do for God! **To be a baptized Christian entails not only the receiving of grace and the Holy Spirit, it entails responsibilities.**

I had a professor in seminary who said "baptism is not fire insurance." You don't do it just to avoid the fires of hell. Baptism is a call to action. It is not the one thing we do to ensure eternal life, but the first thing we do to ensure that we live well in this one. Salvation begins in this life through the kind of world we choose to create. Do we accept evil or choose the good?

Nothing can be done without God, of course, which is why we are given the grace and strength to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. Let all of who have been baptized remember our calling and choose the Labor of Love. Amen.