

Proper 9, A, July 6, 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

When some future generation tries to understand the spirit of our times, an unknown scholar might run across a collection of the many derivatives of Murphy's Law:

"If anything can go wrong it will. If nothing can go wrong, it will anyway.

"Nothing is as easy as it looks.

"Everything takes longer than you think.

"The other line always moves faster.

"The probability of a peanut butter sandwich falling on the carpet face side up is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet.

"The light at the end of the tunnel is probably an oncoming train."

And that real clincher and Bill's personal favorite: "Murphy was an optimist."

I'm so glad to have a little humor today because the truth is that my heart is deeply saddened. Thankfully, the last line of today's Gospel is also a balm for my wounded soul. The recent loss of two of our dearest parishioners, Lee Baxter and Art Foster, was reason enough to feel this deep sadness, but this past week in New York, another dear soul died peacefully after a sudden recurrence of cancer.

I know you didn't know her, but I want to tell you a little about her because she was a remarkable person. Mary Wibiralske was one of those women whose diminutive physical stature belied the towering strength of a deeply committed Christian. She was a woman of substance; a member of that generation that Tom Brokaw calls the "greatest generation".

She was of the generation of women that stayed home to raise the children and was president of the PTA and the ECW in a time when those kinds of activities were what women were expected to do. Yet she was a fierce supporter of the ideals of the feminist movement in the 70's without ever changing her desire to be her husband's assistant in life.

Together they served as deputies at General Convention for 3 terms, sat on the board of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, belonged to the Global Episcopal Mission Network and were very active in the Migrant Worker Ministry of the Episcopal Church of New York. In his 80's, Fred still serves as senior warden at the tiny church I was assigned to in New York.

All these ministries were a part of Fred and Mary Wibiralske's lives but even though it was Fred's name on all those boards and commissions everyone knew that Fred would never make a move without Mary. Canon John Osgood, the Canon to the Ordinary of New York said it best when he said that Fred and Mary were not joined at the hip, they were welded together. For more than 60 years, Mary served quietly in the background of much of her husband's churchmanship.

But she was a force all her own in her spiritual life. Those who knew her best did not see her as Fred's support, but as a leader in her own right because of her gift of spiritual maturity and ability to bring people together who might otherwise be enemies.

So today I see these three exemplary Christians, Mary, Art, and Lee and recognize that all three share the characteristics of servant leadership. They led by example, not by words or self-proclamation. They served quietly and mostly behind the scenes. Their personalities were also prone to humility as well as having strength of character. These three people did not know each other, yet they all died within a few weeks of each other and shared a faith that was deep and all three were committed to the Church.

The Episcopal Church has suffered a blow at the loss of Mary, Art and Lee. But it's not a loss when we can see their lives as worthy of emulation. Their lives have brought meaning to what it is to belong to a community of believers.

We have a beautiful phrase in our Burial service that goes like this: "all we go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." Well, personally, at the loss of these three pillars, I feel like a couple of those alleluias have gotten stuck in my throat. I am having trouble getting to that resurrection feeling.

Life is sometimes so full of struggle and challenge that it is difficult to see beyond the problems we face. As saddened as we are, those of us who are experiencing the loss of these fine people can find a way to be comforted. We cannot compare our sense of loss with those who experienced the death of Mary, Art, and Lee first hand.

But I know you've had a loved one sick, you've lost people you loved, and you've experienced your own illness and personal crises. Substance abuse, emotional instability, serious illness, family relationships that are strained, financial worries, all these take a toll on our ability to live the resurrected life that God wants for each of us.

So in the midst of our time of sorrow and worry, here is Jesus Christ, sending us this message of love and hope and most importantly, HELP. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

We have help; we have a community of people who are very willing to be Christ's hands and feet to help us in our time of need. But we are reluctant to reach out for help. We are so independent in our minds and hearts, but it is a false independence because the truth is we do need each other. We need that love and support that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

The problem is that the love and support comes not by way of miraculous manifestations of divine relief, but through the hands, and hearts of people. Regular everyday people with whom we have to be willing to show our vulnerability and perhaps that's the rub. To accept help is to accept our limitations, our weaknesses, and our true lack of independence.

Nobody likes to admit their limitations, particularly when we hold ourselves to such high standards; we enjoy being seen as strong and able; we want to appear to not need anyone. That is what keeps us from reaching out; it's called being prideful.

It's hard to express the depth of how wrong it is to let pride get in the way of asking for help and worse yet when we deny accepting help when it's freely offered. The Gospel says "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants..." We need to be like children who have no worry about accepting help or asking for help.

We can continue to maintain the illusion of our independence, but why would we when God so very much wants us to have the love and support of our brothers and sisters in Christ? Remember these words "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

We have our Healing Eucharist on the second Monday of the month and centering prayer is available every Sunday in the Chapel between our two services. Come and be strengthened and refreshed. No one and nothing can stop you except your pride. Jesus Christ is only one YES away from helping you through your struggles. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." AMEN.