

A Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Church, Haddonfield

October 26, 2003

The Rt. Rev. George E. Councill

In December of 1975, just four days before Christmas, I was ordained a priest at Grace Church, Colton, California, in the Diocese of Los Angeles. I presided at the Eucharist in for the first time on Christmas Eve at Grace Church. So, I am especially delighted to begin a new ministry as the Eleventh Bishop of New Jersey, and to administer Confirmation/Reception for the first time here at Grace Church, Haddonfield today. We all live by Grace – God’s unmerited favor toward us; not for anything that we have done, but because God loves us – and I am happy today to be your new bishop, and to be reminded by your parish name that it is only by God’s grace that I or you or any of our Confirmands or anyone else, is here today. God is good! And grace is, well, amazing.

I am deeply grateful to you for your welcome this morning. I’m excited and delighted and a little nervous to begin this new role as bishop. But I am confident that our Lord knows what he’s doing here, even if I don’t. And I know I can count on your patience as well as your prayers. As your rector said yesterday, “Don’t be nervous. We’ll be happy to help break in a new bishop.” Thank you for that.

I want to begin by affirming the many graces that are present here at Grace Church. Some years ago the parish that I was privileged to serve was visited by an African Anglican bishop. After spending a few days with us, he said to me, “There is life here.”

This morning is the first of 164 parish visits that I am undertaking over the next 18 months to two years. I even decided on a name for this venture. I am calling it the John 10:10 Tour. John 10:10 reads, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” You may remember a country western song entitled, “Looking for love in all the wrong places.” Well, the subtitle of my John 10:10 Tour is this: “Looking for life in all (164) the right places”!

I want to say that there is life here at Grace Church. Your parish is alive and active and clearly thriving, by what I see this morning and by what I read in the newsletters and other materials about your church. One of the things that most impresses me is the work that you have done to articulate your mission and vision and values. It’s one of the tasks that I hope to accomplish for our diocese in the early going. (Next time I visit, ask me about that, will you?) I believe that we need to know our purpose as a church; what we want to accomplish together; how we are going to accomplish those things; and how we are going to live and serve together.

You have, wisely, set those things forth in your mission, vision and values. I celebrate that, among your values, you are, first of all, a Eucharistically-centered parish. At the center of your life is the sacrificial love of Jesus, available to us all in the grace of the Sacrament. Keep Jesus and his love at the center. Secondly, that you are called to respect the dignity of every human being. In this world, that is a radical commitment. Hold to it, not only respecting the dignity of others outside, but also within the church. I believe that, at this challenging moment in the life of our Communion, we can share with the world the costliness and the glory of respecting those who differ from us; not giving up and

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walking away, and never saying to each other, "I have no need of you." Thirdly, you are called to serve others. Keep on serving. Apart from the Sacrament, Jesus promised that we would find him in the hungry, the thirsty, the unclothed, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. Find him and serve him there. And I love the humility of your fourth value: "to teach ourselves and others what it means to be a Christian." "Lord, I want to be a Christian, in my heart," is a favorite hymn. We are always only becoming Christians. Let others see that you are growing and that God's grace is abounding. A center for continuing education and formation and training as you follow Christ together.

Speaking of values, what is your most precious possession? Now, it's an interesting question, especially if you have moved lately. We moved to Pennington from Chicago last summer. The estimator thought that we had some 25000 pounds of stuff to move. We were appalled and starting sorting things out and giving things away. By the time the moving van was loaded, we had it down to less than 20,000 pounds and we were pleased with that, but still! What is that most precious? What's of value? And how easily could you let go of that item, if you had to? Only, I suspect, if you thought something more precious was to be gained. In crisis, we make choices that reveal what our real values are.

I raise the question because of the story that we heard about the blind beggar Bartimaeus, whose name means, literally, "son of honor." Like all disabled people in his day, he was consigned to the sidelines of life and eked out a living by begging. There was no other life. He was sitting by the roadside one day, outside of Jericho. Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were walking by. Bartimaeus and the other beggars, who were sitting nearby and hoping for a handout, sat up and listened in. He heard that it was Jesus and he started shouting. They told him to give up and to shut up. But he only shouted the louder, asking Jesus to have mercy on him. And Jesus stopped and called him. And Bartimaeus, throwing off his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus asked him what he wanted. And Bartimaeus asked to see. And Jesus told his faith had made him well. And Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

This story is Good News. First of all, Bartimaeus didn't give up. Did you notice that? Everyone around him and everything about him would have said, "Stay in your place on the sidelines and on the ground. Settle for whatever scraps fall along the way. Don't even think of getting up." And yet, when he heard that Jesus was near, he cried out for mercy. Why? Because he thought that, with Jesus' help, life might amount to more; something abundant. The poet and writer Wendell Berry once said that, "to treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it." I drove by a parish located in the middle of a graveyard one day last week. Outside there hung a banner saying, "Miracles happen here." One value that we as a church could learn from Bartimaeus. Never give up (Churchill).

But there's a detail that we must not miss about this story. It's the gesture: Bartimaeus, "throwing off his cloak." A beggar, even the poorest beggar, had a cloak. It was his raincoat, overcoat, and sleeping bag. If he left it with a creditor, the creditor still had to give it back at nightfall, according to the law. But a beggar used a cloak as a collection

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plate. He spread it out on the ground in front of him and people left their coins on it. So, when Bartimaeus threw aside his cloak, all his money from that day of begging went flying. He literally, let go of everything in order to come to Jesus. No wonder Jesus was impressed with his faith. Do you and I have enough faith to let go of our security blanket? To get up off of our assets and off the sidelines and into life, real life, following Jesus?

Life, or a large part of it, is learning to be wise about what we hold on to. Who we hold on to. What is holding on to us. And the Good News is not assuring us that we never have to let go of who and what are the most precious things in life. The Good News includes the bad news that, at the end of the day, we have to let go of it all... And that it will still be OK, because of the one who holds on to us. He's got the whole world in his hands. You and me, sister. You and me, brother. He stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the Cross in order that no one would, finally, be lost from his embrace. We can, by grace, have the grace to open our hands. To let go of anything and everyone who would come before Christ in our lives.

And then there is what Bartimaeus received. Not only sight to see life going on; but insight to know what life is for. At the end of the story we are told that, "Immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way." Bartimaeus got what he asked for. But he also got what he needed. We want a lot of things. But what we really need is someone to follow. A purpose that honors God. So, in the end, the son of honor, honored God by using the gift of his sight to follow the giver of all things on the way.

And so, I offer these three points to our Confirmands today.

Don't give up. Don't let anyone tell you to give up. Don't give up on the miracle of your life and of life itself, the abundant life that Jesus promises. And when you are ever tempted to give up, just repeat to yourself, "I belong to Jesus. I belong to Jesus. I belong to Jesus."

Give it up. I mean, whatever you're clinging to or holding to so tightly that it interferes with your living in deeper Communion with Jesus. Whatever your cloak is, throw it aside, and keep close to Jesus. He has time for you, he loves you, and he loves you enough not to leave you the way you are, but to lead you and grow you. And that means giving up some things and all things along the way. He is worth it.

There is a way. That way is Jesus, and you are to follow him. St. Teresa of Avila once wrote: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours. No hands, but yours. No feet, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out to the world; Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now."

We are all beggars here. No one ever rises higher. No one needs to. God's grace is sufficient for all that we need. We need only to honor God with all our gifts and follow Jesus along the way.