

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
The Sixth Sunday After Epiphany
February 12, 2017
Matthew 5:21-37
The Reverend John P. Carr

Fire and Water

Over the last three days at the 168th Diocesan Convention in Galveston I witnessed some things that I want to share with you.

There was a story about Jesus missing from the manger scene in a church at Christmas. This was in a part of Houston that is mostly minorities and they were very concerned about what had happened to the figure of the baby Jesus. A search was made of the church but Jesus wasn't there. Finally, they were back at the crèche hoping that He was somewhere in the straw but no luck, Jesus was not in the church anywhere. Finally, one of the old men said, *"I know where He is, Jesus is in the hood."* They were looking in the wrong place. Jesus was not *inside* the walls He was *outside*, He was with the people. That carried a big message.

Another story came from a little Episcopal church in a small town. The people there went looking for Jesus outside their church. They looked for a need in their community and one Episcopalian found it along with a group of other people from different churches. They found in their community group, that the children of a good section of their little town did not have enough food during the summer because school was out and they did not have enough to eat at home due to poverty. The Episcopalian recalled the passage from John 21:15 and Jesus said to Peter, *"feed my lambs."*

So, since they had a large church kitchen, the one person in the group suggested that the little Episcopal church would open its doors to volunteers to prepare food. The first effort was literally spreading a little peanut butter and jelly on one sandwich and giving that in a paper

bag and two on weekends. The response was immediate and they were soon feeding 125 kids. As word got out, others dropped by the church with chips and cookies so the brown paper bags were better filled. Soon some of the local businesses heard about this and Pizza Hut gave very discounted pizza on Pizza Mondays and soon other vendors in the city gave or discounted fried chicken and hamburgers. Soon over 150 kids were being fed. At Christmas, the same problem arose for the two weeks that the kids were off. Christmas grocery bags of non perishables were assembled for the families of the kids so that they had food over the Christmas holiday break.

This all started with a question in a small group and one Episcopalian who said *"we can help."* They all chose to pitch in and be the hands of Jesus in the lives of those kids. It made the passage from Mt. 25:35 come alive, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."*

These stories and some others awakened me to the need to look for Jesus outside the church building. We certainly come here to worship and learn but "Jesus is in the Hood" and we need to *"feed his lambs."* This requires us to choose to look outside of our "selves" with **a new vision**. It requires us to move from *maintenance to mission*.

When I first arrived here at St. Luke's in the fall of 2013 and we had my first Stewardship talk with you, I mentioned that St. Luke's seemed like a lot of willing people in a row boat. Everyone had their hands on the oars and they were ready to row. They were just waiting for someone to call the cadence so that they could start rowing.

I think that we are underway. We are a team and I believe that we are poised to move outside into the community to be the hands of Christ in the world.

You might not think that we can do much but recall the one person whose thoughts led to the feeding of over 8,000 meals to kids who would have gone hungry.

In 1936 at the Olympics, the Germans were the best in all the rowing events. They had won everything and were in the final race which they were favored to win. The American crew of 8 was a rag tag group of lumberjacks, garbage men and sawmill men from Washington state who wanted to try and win. They had beaten all of the teams of the US who had established rowing programs and won the right to represent the US in 1936.

Before they went, there were a lot of fights. Some left the team but the ones who stayed pulled together. In Germany, in the final race of the 8 man racing shells, the Americans were behind, the Germans were leading. But then, the Americans began to surge forward rowing in unison and perfect coordination. Their coxswain could no longer be heard because the crowd was going wild as the Americans advanced on the Germans. The coxswain pounded the side of the boat to keep cadence and the men pulled together and won by half a length. They left some heart on the field that day. They pulled together.

They chose to put their “selves” aside and row for the team, for their country. Their win sent a message to the world.

We have to choose as well. The message of Jesus in his lessons was to look beyond the law and into the spirit who wrote the law and to choose. He was blasting the Pharisees for following the letter of the law while ignoring the Spirit, ignoring the will of God who established the Law.

Jesus is calling for us to choose to be reconciled with our neighbor and our spouse. He is calling for us to choose which is more important, God’s will or our sinful will.

Jesus is giving an extraordinarily bold and challenging vision of the new order He established. He is calling people to choose to follow His Way, His Spirit, His Father.

It is up to us to choose how we will live. Will we live by our will or by God's will?

In Galatians 5:16, Paul set up a stark choice in living by the Spirit *or* those things that get us into trouble that are called the works of the flesh, *sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, envy, drunkenness, and carousing*. Not a pretty picture.....

These are all the result of making bad choices. None of these are good for us and they separate us from who we are called to be.

But Paul goes on to show the other choices. Those who choose to live by the will of God experience; the fruit of the Spirit, *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*.

These all begin with one good choice and that is to lay down our "self" and to follow Jesus.

We can't say that we don't know, or that we are not aware of what we are called to do, or how we are to lead our lives.

We have the answers, we have to choose.

Yet, even with this knowledge we will still make mistakes, we still fall into sin and need to find our way back. There are great words in the Confession found in Morning Prayer Rite 1 that address our problem and our way back.

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
We have followed the devices and desires of our own hearts,
We have offended against thy holy laws,*

But thou O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord,

And grant O most merciful Father, for His sake, that we may hereafter live a Godly, righteous and sober life to the glory of thy holy Name.

There it is. The recognition that we *know what to do* but have *gone astray*. We know we have gone astray and ask for mercy and forgiveness to restore our relationship with God based on our faith in Jesus and the promise given in his life, death and resurrection.

It is up to us to choose whether we will live by the *Spirit* of the Law, in the Spirit of the Lord and enjoy the fruits of the spirit, or live by our will in our way and suffer all the tragedies of that choice.

In today's reading from Sirach 15:15-20 there is great wisdom that addresses this point. It reads;

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,...
and to act faithfully, is a matter of your own choice.

*He has placed before you **fire and water**;*
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.

*Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.*

*For great is the wisdom of the Lord;
he is mighty in power and sees everything;*

*his eyes are on those who fear him,
and he knows every human action.*

*He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,
and he has not given anyone permission to sin.*

It is up to us to choose and call upon the grace of God to support us in all that we do thereafter.

It is up to us to relinquish control and live by God's way and not the way of the world.

It seems odd but in this surrender,
in this relinquishment,
is found perfect freedom.

Choose well.

Amen