

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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St. Bart's, Ice Buckets and Paul

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, August 24, 2014

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Romans 12:1-8

Today is August 24, a very special day to those of us in this parish. Happy St. Bartholomew's Day! Yes, August 24 is the feast day of our patron saint, Bartholomew. Some churches hold big celebrations for their patronal feast days. Our neighbors St. Mary the Virgin, St. Thomas, St. James, Epiphany, Ascension, Holy Spirit, St. Ignatius, Transfiguration—each of those has a particular feast day on which to celebrate. There are two I'm still wondering about (which shows you what I do with my clergy spare time): The Church of St. Matthew and St. Timothy ... do they get two feast days? And the Church of the Heavenly Rest ...?

At a midtown clergy gathering some time ago, someone asked us St. Bart's clergy, "So do you all pull out all the stops for your patronal feast day?" I need to tell you that every one of your St. Bart's clergy guffawed loudly. To our mystified colleagues, we explained, "No! St. Bartholomew's feast day is August 24. No rector has ever been on the premises on that day!" Following the example of our patron saint Bartholomew, our rectors have gone on vacation, celebrating the day in fine style.

Fear not. We are celebrating St. Bartholomew's Day this year—in two parts. Part 1 happened earlier today. At our 10 a.m. Forum, Matthew Moretz offered a wonderful presentation on the eight St. Bartholomew panels in this magnificent space. These panels surround us, but most of us don't know they're here or what their significance is. Matthew enlightened us on all that and shared a lot of information about St. Bartholomew that was new to us.

For Part 2, we **are** going to have a big celebration of St. Bartholomew's Day. We are transferring it this year to September 21 (transfers are legal in the church world, no need to call the Bishop). On September 21, we'll celebrate our feast day in a big way as Kickoff Sunday, kicking off the church program year, welcoming everyone back to church, back to Sunday School. We'll wear our gorgeous red vestments and break out the festive red banners. There will be a special Forum and a special Bible storyteller for Children, Youth and Families. And multiple (multiple!) cakes at a special festive reception after the 11 a.m. service.

Consider this a hot tip. Mark your calendars and plan to be with us. Bring your friends and family.

Now, taking something of a leap ... I'm wondering: How many of you have been following the Ice Bucket Challenge?

Has anyone taken the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is a phenomenon that's gone viral since mid-July. It has raised over \$60 million to support ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) research. As I understand the rules, if you receive an Ice Bucket Challenge, you have 24 hours to be filmed having a bucket of ice water poured on your head or forfeit by donating \$100 to an ALS charity. During your filming, just before the ice water is poured on your head, you have the opportunity to challenge several other people. You can take the challenge or donate or both. Here's another hot tip: This model opens up so many new possibilities for a stewardship campaign ...

A friend of mine e-mailed this week to note that the Ice Bucket Challenge had provided some welcome lighter viewing than the other events in the news this week.

We know those other news events only too well. As Thomas Friedman noted in yesterday's New York Times Op-Ed pages:

The United States is swamped by refugee children from collapsing Central American countries; efforts to contain the major Ebola outbreak in West Africa are straining governments there; jihadists have carved out a bloodthirsty caliphate inside Iraq and Syria; after having already eaten Crimea, Russia keeps taking more bites out of Ukraine; and the U.N.'s refugee agency just announced that 'the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide has, for the first time in the post-World War II era, exceeded 50 million people.' If it feels as though the world of disorder is expanding against the world of order, it's not your imagination.

Added to that are the continuing conflict in Israel and Palestine, and the reverberations of racial tensions from Ferguson, Missouri that echoed close to home here yesterday with a peaceful demonstration on Staten Island.

It is hard, isn't it, not to feel at least buffeted, if not discouraged or fearful or even overwhelmed, by such events—and not only the events themselves but the larger forces behind them.

Paul, in this part of his letter to the Romans that we just heard, speaks to this very condition: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Do not be conformed to this world. Conformed, meaning “malleable,” meaning molded and shaped by forces around us, carried along by whatever the next popular movement is. Being “conformed to this world” is like being a leaf blown by the wind, adrift. Or like adapting so readily to our environment that we fit into it without even thinking. One small example: Over the years has e-mail come to occupy increasingly large parts of my waking hours. That hasn't been a sudden change; it's been very gradual, so gradual I haven't noticed it, but here we are.

What are the things that mold and shape us? Popular culture, social media, movies, books, television, sports, music. Our upbringing. The people we spend time with. The environment we work in. Racism, nationalism, sectarianism—these are forces that teach us that our tribe is good and other tribes are bad. These are forces that prompt us to think in terms of us and them.

Being “transformed by the renewing of your minds” is the antidote to being conformed. Transformed, from the Greek word where we get “metamorphosis,” like the caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly. This transformation, this renewing of our minds by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit, changes us from the inside out. Paul calls us to let the Spirit transform us at our core, so that our faith can be strong enough to keep us on course despite strong and shifting

winds. To be transformed is to be anchored, steady, able to ride out storms and help others weather the storms, too.

I love it that Paul is not separating mind and body, but linking them. The renewing of our minds—being changed from the inside out—goes hand in hand with presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, well pleasing to God. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. That’s a profoundly spiritual act. That’s an act of worship.

And how do we do that? Listen to how Eugene Petersen interprets Paul’s words about gifts:

We are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we’re talking about is Christ’s body ... Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of [Christ’s] body ... let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.

If you preach, just preach God’s Message, nothing else;

if you help, just help, don’t take over;

if you teach, stick to your teaching;

if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don’t get bossy;

if you’re put in charge, don’t manipulate;

if you’re called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond;

if you work with the disadvantaged, don’t let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them.

Amidst the events and forces of our world, Paul’s words—written nearly 2,000 years ago—still bring refreshment and encouragement to us. Taking time and space to discern the will of God, then trying to live our lives dedicated to God’s service, is the natural extension of our corporate worship here together. Worship begins here, but it is meant to be carried out into the world through our own bodies and renewed minds.

When we take our spiritual service out into the world, we do so recognizing each other’s particular gifts, giving thanks to God for all God gives to us, and remembering that God wants and needs all our gifts, not just those of some of us.

Now that’s a challenge we can all take.

I am indebted to Dick Donovan (Sermon Writer) and Eugene Petersen (The Message, extended quote from pp 322-323) for insights into this Romans passage.

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