



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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In the Footsteps of Bartholomew

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 27, 2020

The Feast of Saint Bartholomew

Based on Deuteronomy 18:15-18; 1 Corinthians 4:9-15; Luke 22:24-30

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.

One of the difficult things about Christianity is that it is very seldom what people think it is. Some think it to be little more than a strait jacket of rules and regulations, a tough plate of difficult expectations served with a heaping side order of guilt. Others see it as a fashionable private club for the self-righteous, a place for hypocrites who delight in pointing out the speck in their neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in their own. Still others imagine it as a utopian refuge where angels are constantly singing, and everyone must be in love and harmony with everyone else all the time.

I remember asking a friend of mine who is a monk in a monastic order what it was like living in a monastery, and he said, "It's a lot more like any family you've seen or have ever been a part of than you might think. It is *completely* human."

Karl Marx viewed Christianity, indeed all religion, as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions." It is, he concluded, "the opium of the people." It's his last line that is most often quoted, but to be "the sigh of the oppressed creature" or "the heart of a heartless world" or, better yet, "the soul of soulless conditions" is a description of religion that would offend few of the faithful.

People often assume Christian people will be pious and proper. Every member of the clergy has had someone apologize for saying something off-color in their presence. "Sorry, Padre, I didn't see you there."

But some of the people I've most admired in the faith are often improper and wonderfully irreverent. They can be rowdy, fun, and raucous, and they couldn't be farther away from those old "staid and proper" stereotypes if they tried.

One of the difficult things about Jesus is that he is very seldom who people think he is. People believed the Messiah would come in power and glory, armies would be raised, and justice would swiftly and dramatically be brought to the earth. But the Messiah comes quietly, "on little cat's feet," to borrow that line from Carl Sandberg's famous poem. The Messiah arrives just like the fog, nearly imperceptible and yet an undeniable presence.

- They do not recognize him as he performs signs and wonders.
- They do not recognize him as he hangs on a cross.
- They do not recognize him even as he rises from the grave.

The crowds could not see the true identity of Jesus, to be sure, but the disciples, that intimate group who ate with him, traveled with him, and heard him teaching day after day—the ones who slept close by him as the daylight tumbled into darkness? They? They didn't recognize him either.

If you don't understand a religion (or its God), it's harder still to understand much about a particular community of faith, especially from the outside. Here we are at a church in Midtown Manhattan in the year 2020. From the outside, it looks like it must be a community of means. I mean, first of all it's on Park Avenue! And the architecture is ancient and Byzantine, ornate and glorious. These people must have some resources.

But, a closer look and we see the building is a little worse for wear. The statuary out front is covered in soot, varnish is peeling off the door, and there are visible cracks in the masonry. Adding to this incongruity is the line of people forming down the side of the church, crossing the front, and sprawling down the other side of the church. Hundreds of people, not fancy folks, waiting to receive food being distributed at the door.

Maybe this place *is* different from what we first imagined it to be.

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St. Bartholomew, our Patron saint: a moveable feast found on the Church Calendar on August 24th but moved to this date to mark the beginning of the programmatic year. (Well, for that reason and because very few people are actually around here on August 24th.) Bartholomew is listed among the twelve apostles in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and he's sometimes identified as Nathanael, the friend of Philip, the Israelite without guile to whom Jesus promises the vision of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Nothing more is heard of him in the four Gospels.

It is said he wrote a gospel, which was known to Jerome and the Venerable Bede, but is lost to us. Another tradition says he traveled to India, and the ancient church historian Eusebius reports that when Pantaneus of Alexandria visited India between 150 and 200 CE, he found there *The Gospel According to Matthew* in Hebrew, which had been left behind by "Bartholomew, one of the Apostles."ⁱⁱ

An ancient tradition maintains that Bartholomew was flayed alive as part of his martyrdom in Albania. To this day, flaying knives are the symbol of St. Bartholomew's, an inconvenient truth when it comes to marketing the parish to the modern world. We've decided against the slogan, "Come join us and risk a gruesome martyrdom."

So, let's just review. A religion that is not what most people think it is, formed around a God who was not who most people anticipated, is worshipped by a people who do not behave as one might expect. They gather in a building that is not located in a likely place and that does not look like what we might expect, and this building is named after an early adherent of this ancient tradition, about whom almost nothing is known for sure. Yes, that just about sums it up.

Our colleague Peter Thompson speaks to this in his E-news address this week where he thoughtfully writes, “Without the specifics about how (Bartholomew) spread the Gospel, we are free to imagine all sorts of possibilities. Without any facts we don’t need to stick to the facts. We can make Bartholomew into the hero we all desire. We can write his history. This is good news, I think, for a community trying to navigate its way through tricky times. We don’t need to feel chained to a well-chronicled legacy of a revered historical giant as we struggle with new challenges. The story of Saint Bartholomew is a blank slate. It’s our job—and our privilege—to fill it in.”ⁱⁱⁱ And so here we are, the good people of this community of faith, leaning into the job and into the privilege of creating ministry in the tradition of blessed St. Bartholomew.

The Apostle Paul writes powerfully to the Church in Corinth about the cost of being such a follower of Christ. “To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.”

Don’t sound so surprised. This is the gig. One can imagine the various personalities inhabited by the Apostles. The steady and natural leadership of Peter, the fervor of James and John, the quiet James, the inquisitive Thomas. In a world where there are “show horses” and “work horses,” Bartholomew is clearly not meant for show. He simply gives his life to the truth that’s been revealed to him. That is his superpower. That is his true calling. And, of course, it is ours as well.

This parish is working every single day to give our collective lives to the truth that has been revealed to us. At the very heart of that truth is the command to serve others. Serve the hungry. Serve the questioning. Serve the lonely. Serve the sick, the dying, and the grieving.

When the dispute came up over who would sit in the seats of honor closest to Jesus, one has a feeling that Bartholomew wasn’t elbowing his way to get to the chair on Christ’s right hand. Maybe he understood what the others could not comprehend because they just could not let go of the idea of an earthly kingdom. I don’t believe Bartholomew is Jesus’ primary audience when he’s reminding the disciples, “I am among you as one who serves.” I think our friend Bart already got that.

You see, it isn’t just what we embrace in this world. It is what we can let go of, what we are able to reject. A wise mentor of mine used to say, “True spirituality is about detachment.”

I believe we are a part of this faith community in one of the most demanding, exciting, and intense periods in the long and storied history of this parish. More than 200,000 of our fellow citizens have died in a pandemic—a stunning loss by any measure—and this tragedy has taken place in the midst of a profound public silence.

Our economy is shaken. The evening news is disheartening. The people are frightened. The drumbeat for justice continues to pound. The politics are precarious. Work horses, not show horses. That’s what is needed now. That is precisely who we are called to be.

Our goal is not success. Our goal is not an outcome. Our goal is a way of being. Our goal is to be faithful. Our goal is to listen to the voice of God and then to act. Our goal is to advocate on behalf of those who have no voice. Our goal is to serve others in Christ’s name.

To remain humble? Certainly. To be like Jesus? Yes, always and everywhere. Yes! Yes!

And in the process to be just a little more like our beloved St. Bart, whose life and ministry we commemorate on this day.

Amen.

ⁱ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, (manuscript written in 1843-44 and published after Marx's death), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, (Edited by Joseph O'Malley and translated by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley).

ⁱⁱ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, 1997, Church Publishing, Inc, c, 1998, p. 334

ⁱⁱⁱ The Reverend Peter Thompson, *St. Bart's E-News*, September 24, 2020

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