

A Humble Teaching
Sermon preached by the Rev. Becky McDaniel
Sunday, September 16, 2018
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

There is a little-known story by Leo Tolstoy called "Three Hermits" that tells the tale of a bishop who, while sailing to a monastery, comes to learn about an island where three holy men reside and have been known to care for sailors and fishermen who have found themselves stranded. In his curiosity, the bishop convinces his captain to take him to the island to meet the three holy hermits. When he meets them, he realizes that they do not have much knowledge of holy scripture or proper prayer, and he eagerly begins to teach them the Lord's Prayer. Sadly, the hermits blunder and mumble and struggle to learn the prayer, and when they finally seem to have it right, the bishop leaves the island with a sense of accomplishment and thankfulness that he was able to teach the hermits how to properly pray. After his ship has sailed beyond sight of the island, the bishop notices something in the distance on the water coming closer with every minute. It is not a boat or a fish, but it is something rather large. Suddenly, he realizes that it is the three hermits, running on the water, gleaming white. They call out, "bishop, we have forgotten your teaching and remember nothing of the words. Please, you must teach us again!" The bishop is amazed, crosses himself, and

says, "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

In today's epistle, the letter of James, we hear the statement that "not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." James warns of the temptations of boastfulness and restlessness and encourages his community to be wise and righteous in its aspirations towards teaching. The warnings of James lead us to question: What does it take to be a good teacher? How are we called to share the good news of our Christian faith?

When I was ordained a priest in Staunton almost two years ago, a parishioner gave me an ordination gift: a small square piece of stone with the words of St. Francis painted across it - - "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary." Words are important, are they not? Here I am in the pulpit, preaching with words. I feel that what I have to say to you is important, or I wouldn't be up here. But I also understand what Tolstoy and James are trying to convey. What is more important than telling your faith is showing your faith. This

is what the letter of James is all about. The statements that frame today's passage (just before and just after what we are given in the lectionary) are these:

"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." . . . "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

"Gentleness born of wisdom . . ."

I remember a religion professor that I studied with at the University of Virginia whose teaching will remain with me always. He was different. He did not come to class with slides or any kind of formal presentation. He did not even come to class with notes. He simply walked to the front of the room, lifted himself onto a table, sat down with legs crossed, and listened as much as he spoke. He loved questions, and so after telling a story, he would sit in silence until a question arose. He was quiet, humble, and careful. He taught us to meditate. In a climate of noise, argumentation, intensity, and hurry, he taught us all to slow down, to contemplate, and from that inner place of contemplation, to serve humankind. Quite simply, he showed us how to be. He showed us by his good life and his good teaching the gentleness that is born of wisdom.

Jesus is our greatest teacher. He told stories, and then was quiet, sometimes even disappearing into the silence. And Jesus showed; he demonstrated how to live. Jesus healed the sick; he fed the hungry; he walked the way of love. Jesus said, "Follow me." Jesus calls us to walk in his ways and to listen to God and each other, to be open to the discovery of gentle wisdom and not blinded by our boastful accomplishments. Jesus teaches us to be humble. In today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus says "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." We are called to take up the cross and follow as humble servants, not as boastful teachers. We are called to let go of our attachments to recognition, status, and personal gain when we carry the cross of Christ. We do not teach and preach to boast of our faith; we do so to share the Kingdom of God, which humbles us and often brings us to our knees. We may ask ourselves today, "how are we to be humbled?" Tolstoy's bishop was humbled by hermits on a deserted island; may we also be humbled (by whatever means God grants) so that we may learn to listen and to pause and reflect, and ultimately to *show* the way of our faith, and when necessary, use words.

As we embark upon a new year of Sunday school and religious education, we must also look to the children; we may be humbled by the young whom we teach. One of the greatest Christian teachers of children, Maria Montessori, wrote these words on the eve of her death in 1952, and they ring true today as well.

“Never, as in this moment, has the Christian faith needed sincere effort by those who profess it. I would like to ask all of you, who are gathered . . . to consider the great help that children can bring to the defense of our faith . . . Do not think that because the child cannot understand in the same way that we adults understand that it is useless to allow him to participate in our religious practices. The staunchest and deepest faith is generally found among the unsophisticated people whose women take their children to church while they are still breastfed: the child’s unconscious absorbs divine powers while the conscious reasoning of adults is only human . . . Take then, as help in your task, with faith and humility, the all-powerful children.”