

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, October 16, 2011.

Tuesday is the day set aside by the Western Church for more than a thousand years to remember the life, work, and ministry of Luke, for whom this parish church is named, Paul's "dear and glorious physician." The two men, Paul and Luke, are closely connected, and the lesson we just heard from Paul's second letter to Timothy leads us to thoughts about both men. And they were men like us, not divine by any means, but extraordinary men who are remembered now almost 2000 years after their time on this earth, and who will surely be remembered 2000 years from now. Paul was assuredly the more difficult of the two. Mark, Barnabas, Timothy, Luke and others could attest to this, that Paul was likely about as easy to work with or for as George Steinbrenner, the late owner of the New York Yankees. We see this, and another side of Paul, along with an introduction to Luke, in the letter to Timothy.

Paul clearly senses his earthly life and work are coming to an end. Likely written from house arrest in Rome, Paul knew he had alienated the governmental establishment so thoroughly that there could be only one way out, through execution and martyrdom. And he was right, as Paul usually was. He is old enough and has been around long enough to

pat himself on the back a little, and we can forgive him that, particularly in such lilting language:

I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith. Henceforth
there is laid up for me the crown of
righteousness which the Lord
will award to me, and to
his other followers.

The end approaching, Paul wants young Timothy to come see him, and quickly. Then his crotchiness, which makes him so human, appears, in the gratuitous listing of those who when he really needed them, left him:

For Demas, in love with this
present world, has deserted
me and gone to Thessalonica.
Crescens has gone to Galatia,
Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke
is with me...

And my favorite: Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds. In other words, Alexander will get his. There was really no need to throw in that dig against Alexander, when we

hadn't even been talking about Alexander. That was just vintage Paul, never mind that there may have been two or three other sides to the matter. Again, he was just so very human, and difficult as great men often are. It has been suggested that one constant in Paul's letters is the admonition to "Stop enjoying yourselves. God's about the place." At a dinner party, or just over a cold one at the end of the day, you call Luke, not Paul. Remember that on Malta a poisonous snake bit Paul and the snake died. I rest my case.

"Only Luke is with me." That's not bad company. We don't know a whole lot about Luke. In truth we don't know a whole lot about anyone in Scripture, but Biblical scholars over the centuries have concluded, believably, that Luke was a physician. Certainly there is Biblical record of Luke and Paul healing the sick on Malta. There is a tradition, from the 14th century, that Luke was a painter, but I don't know that we can take that to the bank. Anecdotal evidence 1400 odd years after the fact, let's face it, is of questionable value. There is though a painting of the Virgin Mary in a church in Rome thought by some to have been done by Luke. Who knows? We do know though that Luke was not a Greek nor a Jew, but a Gentile follower of Christ and an historian. And a published historian at that. And the author of two all-time best sellers. Albino Luciani, the Patriarch of Venice and for 33 days in 1978, Bishop of Rome

as John Paul I, was asked once by a parishioner if he might recommend a good history of the early church. His suggestion, "Try the one by Luke." You see, Luke wrote not only the third Gospel, but also the Acts of the Apostles, really one work artificially divided way back when.

This combination of physician and historian has some currency to it. Perhaps 15 or so years ago, when the gnomes with green eyeshades at Blue Cross and like outfits came up with the notion of managed care, those of us in the Duke system were asked to choose a primary care physician. As I recall they sent us biographical sketches of six or eight doctors, none of whom I knew, but one stood out above all the others, for she was a physician with a doctorate in history. I looked no further of course, have never looked back, and she is a dear friend to this day. Just like Luke, or I suppose Lucia.

Luke was likely among the 72 disciples, and was with Jesus at Emmaus. Only Luke gives us the Christmas story at Bethlehem, and Jesus' childhood, "Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Luke gave us that story, for all times and in all places, inspiring all the Christmas crèches in the world.

No one ever called Paul a feminist, but Luke in his Gospel has a remarkable number of favorable references to women, for example Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, the woman of dubious

reputation who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive designer oil, and the widowed mother of Nain who thought she had lost a son. And Luke emphasized Mary far more than Joseph in the nativity story. Seems fair. Luke's is a kinder, gentler gospel, and we might guess he was perhaps more comfortable with women than Paul was.

We think of Luke most of all though in terms of healing, which is I suggest what we as the church are about most of all. Healing is multidimensional. Too often society thinks of healing as Bob Jones or Oral Roberts telling us to put our ailing body parts directly on the TV screen and see what happens. My father as a teenager in the 1930s was so wowed by the display of healing Aimee Semple McPherson put on that he went to her traveling tent show two nights running. Each night Aimee laid hands on poor crippled little Johnny, who cast aside his crutches and leapt, not unlike Baryshnikov, exclaiming "Thank you Jesus, I am healed." That experience soured my father on spiritual healing for the rest of his life.

Now there is miraculous healing, make no mistake about it. Tumors do on occasion vanish overnight. Doctors in San Francisco use the words miracle and miraculous in commenting on the recovery of my son Will after a car ran over his head and body in April. The prayers of those here may have had a hand in that. And by the way, he told me the

other day that except for hearing in one ear, he is just about back all the way. When I think of spiritual healing though, I often think of Tom Fraser, the eighth bishop of North Carolina, and the bishop who let me into the ordination pipeline 35 years ago. Bob Johnson I believe wears his episcopal ring. He could be difficult and had some of Paul's personality. I frankly used to wonder why he went to seminary instead of to MBA school. But then he got sick, with some form of incurable cancer as I recall, and he retired to spend the balance of his priesthood and diaconate as a Duke hospital chaplain. The transformation in him was vivid and almost tangible, and as he was preparing for his own death, he said something powerful that I have never forgotten:

I am not well, not by a long shot,
but I have been healed.

Remember that if you take nothing else home with you today.

Once in a great while I offer the Prayers of the People in the liturgy here. When I do so I always ask for healing, healing of body, of mind, and of spirit, healing of broken relationships, healing among nations, and healing here in this holy space. That pretty well covers it I think. I wish too there could be more healing among the branches of the Church. I think the day will come, though certainly not in my lifetime and maybe not in the lifetime of anyone alive today, but the day will surely come

when the breach between the Eastern Church and the Western Church will be healed, as will the breach between Rome and Canterbury. That one will be the easier of the two. Ireland is perhaps as peaceful now as it has ever been. Time was when no one could be elected Mayor of Boston without pledging support for a United Ireland, and maybe for the IRA. The Holy Land? Who knows? Isaiah told us, give or take 735 BC, that:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with
the kid, and the calf and the lion together,
and a little child shall lead them.

Now you can argue that Isaiah never had to consider the present day Holy Land, with the West Bank, Gaza, and the settlers from Brooklyn and Queens, but it was likely no more peaceful 2700 years ago. Include Israel and Palestine in your healing prayers.

Addiction, to alcohol or other mind-altering drugs, plagues this world, this country, this city, and this parish and people here. The Episcopal Church, in particular Sam Shoemaker when he was rector of Calvary Church in Gramercy Square in New York, embraced Alcoholics Anonymous early on. I didn't know Bill W. and Dr. Bob of course, but I knew one who did know them 75 years ago. AA, thanks be to God and one day at a time, is here to stay. You have to be honest about it though.

Denial , sometimes called the cheerful defense, is such a powerful human emotion that honestly with oneself may be more difficult than honesty with God. Healing takes all that into account though and must never be underestimated. Will Rainey in Burke County years ago had difficulty with that, but he did believe in the power of prayer. Will had been drunk for several days and thought he was dying, so he asked his wife to pray for him. And she did, “Lord, have mercy on my poor drunk husband,” whereupon Will hollered from the bedroom “Honey, don’t tell him I’m drunk. Tell him I’m sick.”

Most of all I think we pray for that healing which brings peace, be it peace in a broken home, peace in a joyous birth or a blessed death, peace in the air, on land and sea, and under the sea, peace and deliverance from addiction and violence, peace in the church universal, peace among religions, peace among the poor and rich alike. We must work for it, pray for it, vote for it, and mean it. We have to take care that the words of Jeremiah a hundred or so years after Isaiah do not come true:

They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

Peace, as we must surely know, has a price, in sacrifice and loving renunciations by all parties to conflict, with God’s help. Luke though

summed it all up for us in the Christmas message of the angels in the field outside Bethlehem:

Unto you is born this day in the City of
David, a Savior, who is Christ the
Lord, and
Glory to God in the highest, and
on earth peace among men with whom
he is pleased.

Luke did have a way with words, and he was at the top of his game when he wrote those, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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16 October 2011