

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
August 29, 2021- 14th Sunday After Epiphany, 17B
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1. 17-27; Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Neither ... forget the things that your eyes have seen nor let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.” †

It's with pleasure and gratitude, mixed with sadness and a little anxiety, that we thank Stephen for the valuable time he has shared with us over the past year. And we wish him all the best and God's speed in his new adventures! Over past few weeks, as I've thought and prayed about what I might say today, I've had to remind myself that the end of a pastoral assignment in a particular parish or community is not the end of relationships. Indeed, *the end* is often just a *new beginning* for everyone involved.

Let's consider that passage from Deuteronomy to the 'People of God,' telling them that they must be a 'wise and discerning people.' They're not to forget what they've seen and learned, and not to let their children forget. James, in the Epistle, reminds us that 'every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.' And so, we all must be observant... 'quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.' Sometimes this seems pretty hard.

It's the Epistle of James that brings everything into focus, at least for me. (With all due respect to Martin Luther, who didn't like this Epistle, I love it.) I think it offers Christians a sound, alternative voice in the canons of Scripture, as we all learned under the tutelage of Stephen at our Springtime Bible Study. Essentially, James declares that what is most important for Christians is *doing*. He warns that knowledge alone is useless, and although many of us think we know scripture and the teachings of the Church, though we may consider ourselves pious or religious, we're often wrong. He warns everyone to be 'doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.' For James, *obeying* is the key. To obey God involves living out our Christianity, through our actions in the world. Being a Christian is not just about hearing, learning, or understanding the scriptures. For James, such religion without action is 'worthless.' He reminds all of us that our faith involves more than belief in Christ, and more than coming to worship every Sunday. To be Christian is to obey and *do* Christ's will.

To obey and do Christ's will... what a fitting passage for Stephen, a man who has on many occasions described his ministry, indeed his faith, as "Christocentric," Christ-centered. I first met Stephen years ago, when I was the chair of the Commission on Ministry. One of the first things I noted was that he loved to talk... And I quickly learned of his strong, passionate, true belief in Jesus Christ. I also noticed that Stephen, like me, is what we called in Rome, "*Vocazione Ritardata*" or a 'late vocation.' He entered his present vocation as priest late in life, having first dabbled in other vocations. Thus, he brings his vast life experience into his present ministry

to share it with others. To me, and I know to many others, Stephen often asked right, though often difficult, questions. Questions that pointed to Jesus. Encouraging prayer and reflection about *who we* are called to be as Christ's Church.

Consider now, the words from Mark's Gospel that Miriam proclaimed today. Jesus warns the Pharisees (and us) to be very careful: Not to worry so much about what happens to us... not to fear what or who we come in contact with, which might defile... but to focus on what comes from within our own hearts. For it is what comes from within, what comes out of us, that can either make or break us, as Christians.

Episcopalians seem to place a great deal of importance on tradition and ritual. Our practices are meant to lead us to holiness... and our worship together, our liturgies, are meant to reflect our values. However, the 5th Century theologian, Prosper of Aquitaine argued (in defense of St Augustine), as Christians our faith is developed through our liturgical actions. The abbreviated phrase attributed to him is: '*lex orandi, lex credenda*,' that is, our belief stems from, arises out of our prayer and liturgical practice. Many people feel, as do I, that certain religious practices help us to develop a meaningful relationship with God and with our neighbors. Public worship, private prayer, charitable giving, service to others, hospitality, and forgiveness... These are all ritual actions that deepen our sense of God's presence and love within our lives. Still, Jesus' words to the Pharisees are indeed an invitation to each of us, to consider our attitudes about religious practice, ritual, and religion in general. If such practices lead to moral rigidity, self-satisfaction, or to a sense of our superiority over others, then they're really an example of defilement from within.

Here at St. Mark's, Stephen has energized all of us to be mindful of this. He's promoted more community outreach and involvement. He's helped us engage the "Make a Meal, Make a Difference" food program, in which our parish provides healthy cooked meals for at least 3 families in our community. He's encouraged us to try on new things. It's what comes from within, what comes out of us, that makes or breaks a Christian community.

So, as we prepare to say farewell to Stephen, we do so with a spirit of humility and gratefulness for all the gifts he has brought to us. And we remind ourselves, though our God is unchanging (to use James' words), we humans *must change*. For change, growth, and transformation are all part of the Created world. We humans are called to obey God and to embrace change, and part of that includes saying goodbye. Let's remember, no matter how far away we may seem physically, the bonds we have formed together in Christ are never broken. 'Life flows on,' and while we move on, the prophet instructs us, 'Never forget the things your eyes have seen nor let them slip from your mind...' True bonds are never broken!

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