

“What an Empty Church Should Tell You”

February 19, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler Pennsylvania
(The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Text: *“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’”*

-- Leviticus 19: 1 NRSV



(TPC church lot from the pastor's study, February 16, 2017. photo by JCRS)

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

I was watching a recent Penguins home game on cable. The “Star Spangled Banner” was being sung by Pittsburgh’s own, Jeff Jimerson. As the song was concluding, the TV cameras were isolated on the Penguins’ Captain, Sydney Crosby. He crossed himself as many Catholics do I have known; like many athletes and competitors have done so many times at the foul-line in a basketball game, or on some other place of play. I don’t know why it surprised me, but it did! Crossing one’s self: the dip of the right hand from forehead to heart then left to right across the chest. My wife, who grew up Roman Catholic, tells me that this is the starting action

for any prayer prayed; the actions accompanied by the words, *"In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen."* I can't know the interior motive of those sports figures that do cross themselves before taking the foul shot, or before donning the helmet to skate to the face-off circle at center ice, or line-up across the line of scrimmage . . . Is it a rote action that is more of a habit once learned long ago whose meaning is now largely lost? For others it may be a kind of lucky charm, I suppose, an added bit of "vigor-ish".

In growing up among all of my Presbyterian and Protestant family and friends such business was never practiced – we never crossed ourselves, ever, like this . . . I have to say that I do intone the words my wife says are spoken, but usually at the end of my sermon as a way to bring resolution to what has gone before. By now you realize that my sermons you read week-to-week always conclude, *"In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy spirit, Amen."* Well, I actually say these words aloud as I conclude the sermon preached in church . . . In a way, I suppose, it is like adding a postage stamp to the letter just written, or a spoken seal of approval for what has transpired that I say the words, even if I do not supply the motion of my hand in forming the cross to go with it. . .

Seeing Sydney Crosby cross himself, however, identifies him publicly as a Christian by reference to the action . . . and if, as Elaine says, making the sign of the cross is the start of a prayer whose words are *"In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen,"* then everything that comes after that is prayer! Imagine that in crossing himself, Sydney Crosby is setting the context for his play within the purview of God; as an offering to God! This becomes quite meaningful to me, how about you!?

Making the sign of the cross, a move made first, vertically, then horizontally, accompanied by the inclusive words that invite the presence of God – Father, Son and Holy

Spirit – can be a powerful form of expression that accompanies Christians everywhere they go and in whatever they do.

What we are attempting to do is to better understand our vertical relationship with God spiritually (the motion of my hand from forehead to heart), so that we may more effectively minister and serve the horizontal relationships God calls us to enter into as a congregation and as individual disciples (the move of my hand across my chest from left to right).

The scriptures today speak to this cross of relationships.

"Given the varieties of . . . relationships, pleasant and painful, friendly and hostile, the community of faith [– the Church –] needs a polar star, a governing principle for any and all relationships. Matthew 5 concludes with Jesus reminding his hearers that neither friend nor foe determines behavior; rather we are to love as God loves. In a similar vein, Leviticus holds before all relationships the constant of Israel's faith: I am the Lord your God."

The cross of relationships finds its center; it's orientation in the radical nature of God's love, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus. We are not capable of entering into the full calling of these relationships without God's help; without his love for us. As the Scriptures tell us, *"We love because he first loved us."*

But when we allow ourselves to be loved by God, we do become capable of living out the call of these relationships in new and bold ways. New because they are grounded in the God who is always doing a new thing; bold because they do not reflect the world-weary, business-as-usual-approach to human relationships – an approach that is fraught with failure – but bold because we enter into relationships that ultimately express the character of God, himself.

Leviticus grounds the best possibilities of the human behavior of Israel in the covenantal relationship it has with God; he is the guarantee that such behavior is possible; apart from him, such behavior becomes a mountain none of us can climb.

Jesus exhorts his disciples to redefine what it means to be neighborly by demanding

behavior that is serious, radical and costly. He takes what has been viewed as normative behavior in Hebrew society and extends it to a measure that embodies the kind of behavior God reveals in his love for all. Jesus said, *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* That can only be done as we center our lives in him; at the cross of our relationships with him and our neighbor.

What is to be gained? – A better life; a better neighborhood; a better world.

I once attended a seminar led by the Rev. Stan Ott, Executive Director of the Vital Churches Institute that was focused on local churches reclaiming and re-centering their ministries. At one point, he referred us to the Rev. Dick Halverson, the late former Chaplain of the United States Senate. Dick and my dad, the "Real" Reverend Silbert, were classmates at Princeton Seminary, forty years before I attended that great institution. Listen to what Dick once said:

"The maximum impact of the Church of Jesus Christ in history in the world is not the impact of great and eloquent preachers or denominations, or church hierarchies, or even popes, or priests, or cardinals, or all of the programs that the church has invented. The maximum impact of the Church of Jesus Christ is the influence of the aggregate of believers where they are between Sundays.

"The measure of the effectiveness of a local church is not when the sanctuary is full on Sunday morning, and the programs are in operation. The measure of the effectiveness of the church is what's happening when the sanctuary is empty, the parking lot is empty, and the programs are not in operation, and people are scattered over a metropolitan area, penetrating all of the organizations and institutions of that area, because where they are Christ is – in them. You are the Church."

"The first step for a church to be a church is not the invention of programs that represent our church in the community, but the deployment of people who consciously understand that they represent Jesus Christ quite literally in every place they go."ⁱⁱⁱ

For TPC as a congregation – and all who are individually members of it – to live a life worth living, we must begin here – at the cross – where God in his Christ desires to meet us.

The picture that accompanies this sermon and that graces the bulletin for this Sunday was chosen to reflect the words that Dick Halverson expressed above. I decided that rather than choose any such picture from a googling of random images; I would take a picture of our parking lot at TPC. The words expressed are meant for folks like us . . . That there is a leaded-glass Celtic Trinity symbol that hangs in the window of my study makes it all the more symbolic.

Dick Halverson was a noted preacher and evangelist; as the Official Chaplain of the United States Senate from 1981 until his death in 1995 he was quite visible, but he was, perhaps, most noted for his benediction which he always gave in the churches where he served. I printed it on the front of the bulletin this week, and I quote it here now; it is a most fitting conclusion:

“Wherever you go, God is sending you, wherever you are, God has put you there; God has a purpose in your being there. Christ lives in you and has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in the grace and love and power of Jesus Christ.”

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ From Fred B. Craddock, et al, “The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany” in PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR: A, Trinity Press International, 1992; p.116.

ⁱⁱ 1 John 4:19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stan Ott, as quoted in the seminar “The Acts Initiative”; The Vital Churches Institute, Volume 1, #6-5.