

SERMON 802

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

October 20, 2013

916th Week as Priest

742nd Week at St Dunstan's

7th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



A WHOLESOME EXAMPLE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I believe that most of the good people of Epiphany Church know of our family's recent loss. Not quite two weeks ago, my niece Kate died

at the age of twenty-four, leaving us with many questions and a beautiful eight-month-old little girl named Taylor. Kate had many troubles, many unresolved issues, and her death was tragic but not altogether unexpected. Our daughter Jenny came with me to try to be of help that night, and, thanks be to God, she ended up taking the baby home with her.

But my story this morning is actually about new life in Christ, discovered in the context of daily living. After the death and discovery, a brief graveside service and days of quiet conversation, Jenny and her husband Matthew were called by the Family Court to an emergency hearing. They had already made up their minds about little Taylor.

I am very proud of Matthew and Jenny for many reasons. They are wonderful parents, church leaders, young adults with a sense of purpose. There's more:

Matthew Warren, who isn't even blood related to Taylor, was "all in" from the very start. **He** became a Warren by choice, changing his last name to ours—which for us was an act of **God's** grace. **He** explains it this way:

"Why would I ask Jenny to take the name of my biological father, who abandoned my mother and me, when I was still in the NICU?"

Instead, he chose us when he didn't have to, when nobody expected him to. Now there is a young man of character, a person who knows the grace of **God**.

And if that weren't more than enough, Matthew and Jenny named their first son after me. And then they named the second boy after my younger brother Jim.

So I honor their decision to file for custody of the baby. They are not wealthy. They were not being haughty or holier-than-thou; they are guided by the meekness of Jesus of Nazareth. To be meek does not mean cowardly; no, to be meek is *to be calm with a sense of purpose*.

As Jeremiah says today, and I believe firmly, today and forever, "the **LORD** will watch over them to build and to plant." The **LORD** is making a new covenant with this little family. **He** has put his law

within them, and written it on their hearts. Truly, the **LORD** is their God, and they are his people.

The Psalmist tells us that it is through the **LORD**'s commandments that we gain understanding. In the **Book** of the Law, which we know as **Deuteronomy**, the People of **God** are commanded to execute justice for the *orphan*, providing food and clothing. "Cursed be anyone who deprives the *orphan* of justice," says the **LORD**.

The Psalmist praises "the helper of the *orphan*." The great prophet Isaiah urges us to learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, and defend the *orphan*. And today's prophet, Jeremiah, says, "Do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, and defend the *orphan*." **Hosea** speaks to us across the ages and says, "By the work of your hands, the *orphan* finds mercy." In the New Testament, the **Apostle James** writes, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before **God**, the **Father**, is this: to care for *orphans*."

St Paul wrote to Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in **Christ Jesus**." It's just as if Paul were speaking directly to us. And I believe that he is.

It is a wonderful and a fearsome thing to discover that your life has been touched by **God**. That you have been blessed by the direct involvement of the **God** of all **Creation**. I do not believe that **God** makes orphans; the Lord of Life does not cause death, disease, or destruction; but **God** always desires a transformation of tragedy.

And he yearns for us to help—to do the hard work of loving our neighbors as ourselves—to feed the hungry, care for the sick, defend the oppressed, and protect the orphan.

Jenny and Matthew, Taylor’s maternal grandmother and great grandmother, and I attended the hearing. My brother couldn’t come, a broken man, grieving the death of his child, in the way that Gerard Manley Hopkins called “pitch past pitch of grief.” The child’s biological father was nowhere to be found. **B**ut everybody’s lawyers were there. The judge’s decision: Taylor will stay with the Little Warrens for now.

Two of my brothers criticized my children for filing for custody, and said we didn’t need a lawyer. **A**nother admitted with embarrassment that he thought the little girl should be given up for adoption. One of Jenny’s aunts asked if they could *afford* another child. “We wouldn’t have *any* children if we made the decision only on that basis,” she replied. “We *love* Taylor. We are her *family*. She is a *Warren*. She *needs* us.”

The judge is a good man. **A**wfully young for a judge, but wise beyond his years. **H**e is not the unjust judge of the **G**ospel parable, but the wisdom of both stories is the same: Pray and do not lose heart. Or as St Peter wrote, “**B**e strong and of good courage.”

We cannot see into the future. We don’t know what the outcome will be. **B**ut we will pray and we will not lose heart.

At the ordination of every priest, the candidate undergoes an examination. **A**mong the **B**ishop’s questions is this one:

Will you do your best to pattern your life, and that of your family, in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people?

Our daughters, Jenny and Margaret, have been raised up in the Episcopal Church. We were all there, every time the red doors opened. They were baptized, confirmed, and married in the Church. They lived at St Dunstan's as "church mice" when they were undergraduates at Auburn University. They married devout and earnest young men. And they will raise their children (and with God's help, *Taylor Warren*) in the same faith.

The Church is not a magic answer for raising wholesome children, but hearing the Scriptures every week, taking part in Holy Communion, learning our Church traditions, coming to know and experience the Prayer Book and the Sacraments, and growing in the knowledge and love of the Lord ... these things *change* a person.

So that when the time comes to make life's hard decisions and take right actions, you can do so with confidence and faith, with a sure and certain hope that the LORD God is with you, every step of the way, even if your own family doubts you. **AMEN.**

1,180 words