

SERMON 909

January 18, 2015

Second Sunday after Epiphany

981st Week as Priest

808th Week at St Dunstan's

73rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

JUDGED BY CHARACTER

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

It always seems that small towns have more “characters,” but perhaps we just know them better.

In Fayette where we lived for so many years, there were plenty of them. They were kind of like the saints of God. You would meet them in school, or downtown, or at the park, in church, or in the grocery store, or in shops, or at the library. They were everywhere. There were characters who were my parishioners, and others who were my bank customers, and more who you'd find at the community college where I worked for six years.

Dwayne Armentrout was one of my customers at the bank. He drove a huge diesel dualey pick-up truck and carried a Saint Bernard in the front seat with him, and rattlesnakes in

boxes in the back. Dwayne was a large man, who would tower over you, yelling and gesturing wildly. Dwayne had a big gray beard and arms like tree limbs. He owned the sand and gravel company, and lots of dump trucks and road graders and bulldozers. He was like the boy who never grew up. Many of the locals were afraid of Dwayne, but for some reason I never was. Over the years, I came to learn that Dwayne's aggressive lumberjack personality was mostly a cover. He had a heart of gold, and secretly helped people in need, and rescued animals, and gave presents to poor kids in the projects at Christmas.

Another true character was the hermit who lived next door to St. Michael's Episcopal Church. He worked part-time at the Hub, Jimmy's gas station on Columbus Street, and we all called him Peter Pan. I never knew his real name. He was a hoarder, whose house was buried in old newspapers and aluminum cans. The yard was completely overgrown, and even his car was filled with trash, newspapers, and stuff he found on the roadside. Some people said that Peter Pan had been a CPA until he had a nervous breakdown. When he died, he left his property to St. Michael's. They completely remodeled it, with money left by another character, Gunner Johnson, who came to church once a year, always on Good Friday. Now Gunner's House is the rector's office, a vestry meeting room, kitchen, and classroom.

I'm hoping that Dwayne, Peter Pan, and Gunner are judged mercifully by our Lord, and that he has found a place for them with the saints in light. Perhaps there was more to them than met the eye--that they weren't just odd characters, that Christ found in them an opportunity for mercy and forgiveness, that he knew them as they truly were, and judged them by that character.

Character is a difficult human quality to define. We see good examples of character in today's lessons. The boy Samuel did not know the Lord, and yet he spent his nights sleeping with the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. The old priest Eli was going blind, and Samuel was there to take care of him, and to help him with the duties at the shrine in Shiloh. Eli's own sons were no good; Phineas and Hophni were scoundrels, and a local seer prophesied that they would die in battle. So there was no one to take Eli's place until Samuel arrived. Samuel was like one of the church mice at St. Dunstan's. He was there all the time, and he helped the priest. One night, the Lord called him, and he answered. A thing like that changes you; it changes your character.

Nathanael is called by Jesus to become one of his disciples. Philip told him about Jesus, and Nathanael's blunt response was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It's

a way of saying, “People who come from small towns are nothing special.” But Jesus saw in Nathanael something truly special. He saw a true character. “Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” or no guile as another translation has it. Jesus was saying that Nathanael was authentic, genuine, a down-to-earth kind of person. “What-you-see-is-what-you-get,” is the modern expression.

Jesus seemed to see right into Nathanael’s personality. You know that look, the way that a wise person can look into your soul and see you for what you truly are. Nathanael’s response to Jesus was immediate and direct: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

So here’s my point. *Jesus knows us for who we really are.* He sees into our selves—heart, mind, soul, and strength. He is more than willing to accept our weaknesses and forgive our mistakes, to overlook our shortcomings and to absolve us of our sins. But he knows us through and through. And he calls us to become our better selves, as Saint Paul said.

Answer him when he calls. Follow him where he leads. And you will find yourself living in Christ, becoming a part of the Body of Christ, and becoming the person that Christ would have you become. **AMEN.**