

SERMON 910

January 24, 2015

Second Week after Epiphany

981st Week as Priest

808th Week at St Dunstan's

73rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

REMEMBERING MR. CHILDS

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

Hello to you all. My name is Wells Warren, and I am the priest at St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, just up Magnolia Avenue on the left a couple of blocks. But long before, more than forty years ago, my family lived in the same neighborhood as Dennis and Frances Childs and their two boys Michael and Scott.

The Childs family lived on South Gay, just through the woods behind the Steeles' house on Salmon Street, past the abandoned chicken house where I cut my foot on a piece of broken glass, and into the quiet and manicured lawn of Dennis Childs. That's the way that a child remembers home and neighborhood. Such a memory carries with it a strong sense of belonging and blessing.

We were all (the Warrens, the Childses, and the Steeles) members this church, which was then called First United Methodist Church of Auburn.

My younger brothers, Jim and Joe, were best friends with Mike Childs, and they were in the same grade in the Auburn City School system. We played basketball together, and built forts in the woods together, and we were in Boy Scouts and on the swim team and in MYF and everything else that boys did in Auburn in the 1960s.

The Childses were on my paper route, which ran from Southside Grocery to Salmon Street, and when I was in college here in the early 1970s, I worked for Mr. Childs at The Bootery, “Auburn’s Most Complete Shoe Center.”

You will note that I still say “Mr. Childs,” rather than Dennis, which the grown-ups called him, or Donnie, which people called him in Chattanooga and West Point. To me, he was, and will always be, Mr. Childs.

Not that he demanded stiff formality or obsequious behavior, but that he deserved respect and honor, good manners and kind words. For Mr. Childs himself exemplified those qualities of respect, honor, gentleness, and kindness. Whether Mr. Childs was at church, or at The Bootery, or in the stands at Felton Little, or you met him on College Street, he was always, always, a gentleman.

I don't think of Mr. Childs as an old man, but then many other would do so. For me, he is running up and down the stairs to the shoe store office (never walking), and he is smiling and friendly and listening. Always listening, carefully and closely. And it is not because he is closing a sale, or winning a friend (which were as natural to Mr. Childs as breathing), but because he cared, deeply and naturally, genuinely and without affectation or superficiality, about people.

The American poet Wendell Berry wrote,

I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities. Time is neither
young nor old, but simply new

That's the way I see us all. We may be 62 or 84 on the outside, but inside, we have a different "internal age," the way we see ourselves—not our bodies, of course, but our true selves—our souls. I have known Dennis Childs and his family almost all my life, and I went to work for Mr. Childs at the age of 18 years. That would make Mr. Childs about 32 at that time, and that's the age he will always be in my heart and mind. Full of possibility and opportunity, one who celebrated

the common and everyday with a knowing smile and a twinkle in his eye.

When we were little boys, the Warrens, the Steeles, and the Childs boys attended Vacation Bible School every summer at this church. One morning, Mrs. Grace Wright had us coloring a Bible Story page on the floor of the Sunday School room, top floor, last room on the right. Miss Gracie came up to my brother Jim, who was five at the time, and said, “Why Jim! What a wonderful job of coloring that picture! Do you think you want to be an artist when you grow up?”

Jim looked up at Miss Gracie with dreamy resignation and replied, “Oh, I don’t know. Whatever my mother decides.”

The rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say, is that Jim *never* followed our mother’s good advice. She wanted him to be a doctor, but he stubbornly refused, changing his major from pre-med to philosophy in his senior year at Auburn. He became a doctor, but not the kind that Carolyn Warren expected. He settled for going to Yale, earning a PhD in English, and becoming a professor at Washington & Lee. Some people never learn, do they?

I think about that Vacation Bible School story pretty often. Miss Gracie told it to me in 2005, the year before she died. “Oh, I don’t know. Whatever my mother decides.”

It says to me that we would probably be better off—as children and as grown-ups—if we listened closely and carefully to what the important people in our lives are saying to us. I listened to Mr. Childs that way, closely and carefully. He taught me things that I never realized I knew until years later. Like polishing your shoes, and looking for the silver lining. Like listening to people—men and women and boys and girls—and getting to know them, really know them. Like understanding what the poet William Wordsworth said two centuries ago, that the best part of a good man's life are his small, unremembered acts of kindness and of love. That was Mr. Childs. AMEN.

972 rods