

Proper 27A, Saint John's Olney MD, 12 November 2017
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen
Joshua 24: 1-3a,14-25; Ps 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians, Mark 10:17-22

S.D.G.

Just two weeks ago we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Martin Luther published his 95 thesis in an effort to change the church, not create a new one; but a split occurred and along with it came many changes.

As with most changes, these often can be viewed as both good and bad depending upon your perspective. With due respect to my Calvinist friends there is one change that I view as very unfortunate.

For those who are visual, people like myself for whom artwork, design, images, and aesthetics are very important, a picture is worth far more than a thousand words. Many of the Protestant reformers had a very different view; notably, John Calvin wrote extensively on the reasons to avoid icons and decorative arts in church and worship. His arguments, perhaps a topic of a future sermon, are flawed and run counter to the first and seventh Ecumenical Councils held in Nicea and run counter to the practices of the early church. Regardless, those who speak loudest and generate a following can create a movement, and in this case the iconoclasts, so named for their disdain of icons and other art, removed religious ornamentation in both orderly and riotous ways; many treasures, windows, statues, and icons, were destroyed and lost forever.

Icons tell a story, but more importantly they provide a window through which we can pray. To gaze at an icon is to visually enter into the story and pray within the framework of the story, it is to make real the presence of that which the icon represents. In the case of an icon that depicts a single saint, it is to be able to pray as if that saint were sitting with you and praying with you. Icons are meant to be gazed upon, as one might gaze upon a loved one, with affection, anticipation, openness, and expectation; and as you gaze with affection that loving gaze is returned equally.

The icon before you, on the cover of your service bulletin, may not be familiar but the story it depicts is well known to all; this is Christ and the Rich Young Ruler. We find this story in Mathew and Luke, and today we heard Mark's version of the story.

As we gaze upon this image remember that an icon is a window through which to pray. The image and the details are significant and are meant to form a connection with the viewer. In this image we see Jesus and the rich young ruler. Jesus is seen with the underlying red garment that depicts his pre-created divinity and his blue outer garment that is symbolic of his humanity. The rich young ruler is clothed in the finery of his position in life, the red lining of his cloak is a nod to his desire to be more like Jesus.

The flowers and the flowing water that we see on the left side of the image is symbolic of the fertile ground upon which Jesus stands, the rich young ruler in contrast stands in an arid wasteland. The wasteland upon which the rich young ruler stands comes from Deuteronomy; "He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock" (8:15).

In this icon we see that moment when Jesus "looking straight at him, warmed to him". Another version says: "Jesus looked him hard in the eye – and loved him!" Jesus' compassion extends to the rich young ruler, we know it extends to each of us.

The rich young ruler's shoulders are bent forward, he is humbly seeking guidance; his face betrays the fear that comes with the thought of abandoning his earthly possessions for treasure in heaven. As one translation says: "He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go."

The rich young ruler is scared, just as many of us are scared. Advertisers tell us that we need more. Immediate gratification is a goal that haunts us. God's message of abundance is overshadowed by a the false message of scarcity.

The messages that bombard us from social media, society, advertisers, and the news all conspire to fuel this fear of scarcity. It is good business to fuel this fear, and that is the fear we see in the face of the rich young ruler.

While our own face may echo that of the rich young ruler, our aim is to instead focus upon the face of Christ. His gaze sees the fear and in response Christ reaches out a hand in compassion; it is as if he wants to lead the rich young ruler, and us, over to the fertile ground upon which he stands, the ground that we see with wildflowers and flowing water.

The fertile ground is there for us to stand upon. It calls to us so we can abandon the fear that comes from scarcity and find true joy in harvesting the abundance of fruits that is there for all to share.

The fear of scarcity is so prevalent in our culture and our lives that it clouds our thinking. No one is immune to this fear. My own responsibilities are like many of you; along with the common monthly obligations, each month I pay my own student loans as well as my son's college tuition. We all face financial obligations. What I have found however is that there is a joy in giving to the church that is unlike any other financial transaction. Giving to the church is not an obligation, it is a gift. When I discovered the gift of giving to God it brought me a joy that freed me; I was not freed from financial obligations, but I was freed from the sense of burden that these obligations can create. I still don't enjoy paying my bills, but they don't weigh me down either, I begin to see possibilities.

When I look at the programs and ministries that we are undertaking at Saint John's I am excited by the possibilities; God is calling us to grow and to go into the community, being a part of that is exciting.

Building upon our Christian Education program so it accommodates a growing number of children is exciting. Expanding our worship to include a third service is exciting. Considering the possibility of hiring an additional clergy to share in ministry with this congregation is exciting. God is calling us in many ways and to many ministries, and Jesus is standing there with his hand outstretched inviting us to the fertile ground upon which he stands; Jesus is there saying 'do not be afraid.' With God's help, and your generosity, there is so much that we can do.

For those who have already pledged their support to the church, thank you. For those waiting to complete their pledge certificate please do so by next Sunday so we can thank everyone on that day. And for those who have never completed a pledged before,

you are not alone. The rich young ruler was scared and he walked away; but I can tell you that I, and many others, have found the joy in giving to God and have accepted Jesus' invitation to stand with him among the flowers and flowing water.

The image of this icon, and the image of abundance that permeates the kingdom of God speaks volumes. An image is worth far more than a thousand words; the image of Christ incarnate is worth our very lives.

Amen,