

Proper 19A, Saint John's Olney MD, 17 September 2017  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

S.D.G.

Even though today we look backwards with our worship using the 1892 Book of Common Prayer, this is a day of new beginnings. Sunday School starts today, the parish picnic is today, and our first school chapel was this week.

This year we started the school year in the very beginning with the story of creation as found in Genesis chapter 1. Having preached on these texts it got me to think about going back to the beginning.

So you don't suspect that I am merely recycling my school sermon let me point out that we also discussed Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack, and Quack; those famous ducklings from "Make Way for Ducklings". If you are curious how we can go from Genesis to a pilgrimage of ducklings in Boston I suggest that you join us for school chapel some morning. I can assure you that this is a fresh sermon; it is simply that my talk with the school students reminded me about going back to the beginning.

One of those little known facts about me is that I studied martial arts for many years. Because I was never cool enough as a kid to do it then, I practiced martial arts as an adult. I remember the very first day of training, I attempted to learn a proper front kick. After time and with practice, and additional flexibility in my muscles, I could soon execute a front kick, a sliding front kick, a pop front kick, and a flying front kick.

We would practice these movements, sometimes one small motion at a time, over and over again. Even when testing for higher belt levels the testing always included the very first kicks and forms that we learned as new students. We practiced not to get it right, but we practiced until we could not get it wrong; and then came the distractions.

I could barely manage a proper form or kicking combination, and then someone was attacking me while as I was doing them. Yes, the swords were padded, but they hurt your pride. The distractions came and you now had to block the sword strike while continuing to execute a proper form or kicking combination. But if you didn't get it right, you could always go back to the beginning with how to execute the kick or how to execute that block, and then try again. Even years later, when working at advanced

levels, there was always time to go back to the beginning with the very first movements that we learned.

I was actually training in martial arts while I was preparing for ordination, and the similarities astounded me. Martial arts training came to be for me a spiritual practice, and I also found that contemplative prayer benefited from the focus found in my martial arts training.

For those who have practiced contemplative prayer you know that as you quiet your mind, the distractions come to fill the void. As your mind quiets suddenly you need to buy milk and eggs. So you get frustrated and try to quiet your mind again, and then it is don't forget the bread, and why is that person in the office doing that, is it just to annoy me? and there are at least a dozen emails that I need to reply to – and then you try to quiet your mind again.

The distractions are endless. Those who practice contemplative prayer often suggest that distractions are an opportunity to seek out and find God again; a time to start at the beginning. One particularly spiritual writer suggests that she enjoys distractions and greets them with a smile because she can then brush them aside like a butterfly and greet God again in the new silence.

I have not yet come to greet distractions with a smile, frankly I get angry with myself for being distracted. Yes, on the exterior I likely blame someone or something else, but it is really me who was distracted. A year ago I might have been angry with our dog who decided that my quiet prayer time was a perfect time to nuzzle and get my attention; and instead of seeing God in that distraction I might have voiced frustration. And if it happens enough times I might even want to give up on that prayer practice. But Peter has a lesson for us.

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? For Peter and his culture a sin was the equivalent of a financial debt; remember that in some translations the Lord's Prayer says “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”. Peter wants to know how many times he needs to forgive. If he is counting the number of times he has forgiven, then perhaps Peter has missed the point. Jesus suggests that not seven but seventy-seven times; this is to say you are to forgive an unlimited number of times. And through the parable that follows, Jesus also says that you should forgive as God forgives; which is to say forgive completely and without limit.

For some, today's worship with the 1892 prayer book is not a novelty or a delight, it is a big distraction; be kind with your self and know that we return to the '79 prayer book next week.

When we worshiped with the 1789 prayer book several months ago I received many comments, many of which I expected and one that was a complete surprise. I heard from a broad spectrum of people, of all ages, and from both services, how much they found delight in not, yes NOT, sharing the peace. For them the Peace had become a distraction to their worship. I understand what they shared with me, and now suggest in light of the idea of returning to the beginning, that after the peace, they now have another opportunity to smile and return to God.

And perhaps more importantly, return to God knowing that we are to forgive as God forgives; and that forgiveness includes forgiving ourselves. We can forgive ourselves for becoming distracted, and then smile at the opportunity to return to God.

My life, like yours, is faced with many distractions, and especially at a time like the beginning of the school year the distractions can overwhelm and interfere with my prayer life. As I consider my own prayer life I also need to forgive myself for being distracted and smile at the opportunity to return to God.

I need to return to those basic blocks and kicks that I learned at the very beginning and practice them so that I can do them with and without distraction. I need to return to the prayers that I have learned, being gentle on myself, and smile at the opportunity to return to God.

And the amazing thing is that sometimes when we are distracted during prayer, a connection between the Creation story in Genesis and Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack, and Quack becomes apparent. God speaks to us in silence, God speaks to us in prayer, and sometimes God speaks to us in the distractions.

Amen,