

Easter 4A, Saint John's Church, 7 May 2017
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

S.D.G.

Last week I mentioned that we would be discussing Stephen, deacon and martyr, and that is true but it is not until next week. So if you came this week specifically to hear about Stephen you are here as a result of my error and not a devious plan to increase attendance; I promise Stephen is next week, this week is a brief history lesson.

Perhaps you recall the song with the line "don't know much about history", well that might be my catch phrase. History fascinates me, but I don't have a mind for dates and names. Fortunately I do have books and notes so I can look up what I need. But let's start, like all good things do, with Holy Scripture.

"You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan" (Ex 22:21).

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:9-10).

"Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake" (Deut 14:28-29).

These Old Testament passages, from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, tell of our Biblical imperative to reach out and help others. This passage coming from Paul's letter to the Hebrews refers back to a passage found in Genesis:

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

There is a Biblical imperative to help others, and there is a sense of living that differs from the individualist view that is so prevalent today. In the Acts of the Apostle's Saint Luke writes "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would

sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” This communal life and the sharing of a common purse exemplifies the care for others that was part of the early church, those who had need were provided for. The Church grew out of this model of communal life and within its first 500 years a system for providing to the poor was established. Monasteries also provided comprehensive services by offering homes for the aged and orphans, travelers’ aid stations and even hospitals. In the 4th century when Constantine I legalized the Christian Church the Roman Empire provided grants to the Church so that burial societies, homes for the aged, poor, or orphaned would continue to be available.

Through the Middle Ages, direct relief to the needy was the focus of the Church and the pious. It was not until the early modern era that a shift away from the Church towards government services occurred. It was during this time that poorhouses appeared as well as government taxes that targeted land owners as a way to fund the poorhouses.

Many of these ‘poor laws’ lacked compassion and were based upon the belief that harsh conditions were a motivator, so they created an environment that was hostile to those in need.

The early Church acted with compassion because they saw every person as *Imago Dei*, the image of God. With each encounter, with each assistance to those in need, they saw the face of God. As Jesus tells us: “just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

The Church acted with compassion because they saw *Imago Dei* in everyone they helped, the state acted because they saw the poor as a direct threat to the social order.

With the industrial revolution religious groups created a more formalized method of helping others. Examples of this include the Salvation Army and both the YMCA and YWCA. But a split in theology occurred in the church in the early 1900’s. Some denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church and others, followed a theology that called for social change and care for the needy. Other denominations, notably the more evangelical, began to emphasize a theology that focused on church growth and evangelism; these churches were no longer in the business of helping the other, of caring for the needy.

Thankfully, the Episcopal church has remained true to our Baptismal Covenant; we see this as we proclaim to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and as we strive for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. This is a core value, this is our foundation. It is upon the rock of our Baptismal Covenant that we stand.

Since the early 1900's there has been a proliferation of charities and organizations whose stated goal is to help others, some are faith based many are secular. There are more than 1.5 million charities in the US, and some are certainly better than others. With just a few clicks of the mouse it is possible to give money to any number of important causes. With your cell phone in hand many of you could donate money to a charity before I finish this sermon; and that is helpful and powerful; it is also lacking something.

What is missing from most of these organizations is the scriptural imperative, the compassion and the *Imago Dei* that was part of how the Church first began to help others. With so many causes and charitable options it is important for the Church, and specifically the Episcopal Church, and our church, to rise above the din and carry the message of the Gospel out into the world. That message comes from helping those in need. That message comes from helping one of the least of these who is a member of Christ's family. As we help others, we too will be changed; we will witness *Imago Dei*.

Speaking as someone who was active in Rotary International and believes in what they do, churches must be more than a Rotary Club with a bell tower. We must take the Gospel to the streets in a way that other charities can not. The history of helping others started with the Church, we can claim that history and that role in society even amidst a largely secular age.

The message of God, the message of Christ, is one of love; God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to be with us. Acting with love is more than simply checking off a box from our to-do list, acting with love is witnessing *Imago Dei* in the those we meet, in those we help.

Knowing our history, knowing the history of the early Church, we are called to repeat it. We are called to take Christ's love into the world. Remember and fulfill the familiar refrain – they will know we are Christians by our love. Amen,