

Stewardship Sermon, Epiphany, 10/9/05, The Rev. James Donald

What are you in? I know we are all in this wonderful, historic church right now, but what state are you in? Are you in the right? Are you in style? In time with the organist or choir? In step? In conformity? Are you part of the 'In Crowd'? One of those people in good health, or in line, or in right relationship, or in love? We are all in something, or probably more like an array of things, of conditions that determine how we are and what we will do. We may well have negative images of what we are in right now: in denial, or in trouble, in confusion or in jeopardy, in opposition or in rebellion, in restraint or simply incensed.

Think of the difficulties in the world right now. We are all in Iraq whether we like it or not. We are in the Gulf Coast disaster in multitudes of ways. We are in the midst of the potential long-term changes in our Supreme Court. We may even be in the midst of pennant races or an early undefeated football season.

There are also the potential dilemmas of our own personal lives. We have all the details of our marriages/relationships closest to us. We have our children. Just yesterday we had the most wonderful change in our family life, the birth of our first grandchild; Jacob Michael Donald is in Atlanta and has a tremendous amount of our interest and attention. He even brings up the dilemma of the gasoline crisis we face in trying to decide whether to drive or fly to greet him soon.

All of us have our own dilemmas but I have my own personal one these days. A year ago last April, the Saturday after Easter, I went out for a three mile run, a practice I had been in for nearly thirty years. About a half mile from our house down in the Palisades I suddenly had a wicked headache. I ran on for a few hundred more yards and thought if I just pulled over and lay down for a minute it would pass. On this small patch of lawn I was soon joined by a man from the neighborhood who asked if I needed help. In my automatic Rector mode I was very clear, trying to assure him that I was all right, but giving him our phone number so that he could call Kathryn, my wife. She arrived soon and they called the ambulance. I remember it rolling up, and that is it. My next memory is of three months later, finding myself in the National Rehab Hospital. I had been to Georgetown Hospital where Kathryn had to make the decision whether to authorize an extensive neurosurgery to clamp off a brain aneurysm and then send me to rehab. I only drifted into consciousness gradually over the next few months, made it home in July, 2004, and then went up to Johns Hopkins for a state of the art brain drain permanently implanted.

The past year and a half has been completely unusual for me. A year ago right now I was just getting over these extensive neurosurgeries and was carried by the gifts of my best friend, Kathryn, and the community of St. Columba's. It was in January of this year that I finally had enough brain power to see that my recovery would take a long time, was not totally certain, and could be a burden for the whole parish community. I decided to take advantage of the disability retirement provision of the Church Pension Fund and give us all an opportunity to get on to the next phase of our lives.

I am really aware that my case is fairly dramatic and very hopeful. When I consider what I have been "in" during the past year and a half I have a whole list of descriptors. I have been in danger, crisis, and extremity. But I have also been in amazing grace. The prayer cycle of thousands of people all across this country included me. People tell me of going to church in distant states and hearing my name on the prayer list. What a privilege to be thought of and held up that way.

And it brings me back again and again to one of my favorite scriptures, found in the Epistle appointed for today. Paul is writing to the church at Philippi that he founded, reminding them of the central thoughts. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he reminds them. Stay focused on the positive things, not just the dilemmas you face. And he shares a short autobiographical thought with them as well: “I rejoice in the Lord greatly,” he writes, “that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:10-13)

The solution for graceful living is in this central relationship. Doing things through this One is critical. It is not just a matter of doing things on my own. In fact, I am not capable of being myself other than in relationship. The most contemporary translations of the Greek New Testament, the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version, both translate Phil. 4:13 as “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” All previous English translations say, “I can do all things *in* him who strengthens me.” In and through are subtly different facets of the same gem. They both lead us to the central questions, how do I get close enough to the one in and through whom I can do all things? How do I develop this relationship? It is the very core of the spiritual life to which we are called.

We begin at the beginning. This central relationship with Christ begins by asking Him in and by receiving Him in our active lives. We are justified—that is, enter into right relationship—by grace, not by works. It is a complete wonder to realize that before I ever woke up to searching for God, God was searching for me. Acceptance by God has nothing to do with merit. We do not earn it; we receive it. So what do we receive?

We each have our own story but I can share a little of mine with you. I think of one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. It was the Saturday of Orientation Week my freshman year of college, September, 1962. I was walking down Church Street in Burlington, Vermont, when along came a girl from my high school homeroom who was a good friend. With her was another girl from the University of Vermont who caught my eye. No one could have told me that she would be the greatest gift I would ever receive, but now, only 43 years later, she is still by my side, the one who has taken such tender care of me, especially in the past year and a half. She is the one through whom I received my two next best blessings, the births of our two sons in 1970 and 1972.

Thirty years ago last month I received another of my great blessings when I began study at the General Theological Seminary in Manhattan. While there I began a number of friendships with fellow students, some of which are fully blessed today, one of which is with your Rector, Randolph Charles. Our paths have crossed in numbers of ways over the years, including serving together in the Diocese of South Carolina where, oddly enough, I seemed to have the most prominent accent.

Graduation from seminary brought me to Washington for the first time when I served as Lower School Chaplain at St. Albans School for a year. It was when I went to my first parish position at Grace Church, Silver Spring, that I received one of my most important spiritual blessings. My whole adult work life up until then had been in school, either as a student or a teacher. That meant I would arrive for work at 7:30 in the morning. I quickly discovered that

nobody in the parish wanted me so early in the morning and that if I just continued to get up at the same time I had a good hour at the start of the day. It was the answer to my central prayer request in those days; I had a time for a regular prayer time. I began regular time for the Scripture and prayer, even finding my motto in Ps. 119:145 “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I put my hope in your words.” It is a habit I have lived for over a quarter century and one which I am so pleased to have been able to regain in recent months. Two chapters of the Old Testament followed by one of the New, at least a page of writing in a journal, and a time with a prayer list mark this habit. It is the best time I spend on many days.

It also led to one of my other blessings, an active running program. I like to keep things as simple as I can, so I have some little phrases I repeat to myself. “No Bible; no breakfast,” is central to my spiritual life. A friend of mine gave me the runner’s prayer; “Lord, you pick them up, I’ll put them down.” This all led to running over a thousand miles a year for most of the past thirty years, what many would consider an enormous waste of time but what has centered me and equipped me for the stress I have held. I am told that after going down with this brain aneurysm while on a run my staff colleagues were dealing with the shock of it. It was frequently said in those first days, “Gee, Jim was in the best shape of any of us and this happened to him.” But it took them only a short time to begin saying that if I were not in such good shape I probably would not have survived at all. Kathryn tells me even the physicians at Georgetown said this. A given discipline, a little habit I developed over years, brought its own blessing. A person with a discipline, after all, is a disciple; one who learns to live the life his teacher lives.

Stewardship is a great concept, one at the center of our life in Christ. The focus of stewardship is centered on the question of what you do with what you’ve been given. To reflect on those things we have been given is to lead us to remember their source, that there is nothing that ultimately does not come from grace. Even the elements of our life that are self-made, that come from our intelligence and energy levels, come from those qualities we have received as gifts. To spend time on the Scriptures and praying was anything but a waste of time for me. To spend energy and time over the past 43 years on the key relationship on this earth, that with my best friend Kathryn, was anything but a waste of time for me. To spend time on blowing off steam by running or exercise was anything but a waste of time for me. They have been at the heart of our personal stewardship. Kathryn and I have both also been full tithers to the parishes we have served, giving a full ten percent of our pre-tax incomes to those communities. We have experienced the full blessing of those commitments: attention, gratitude, reminders of where it all comes from in the first place, and the practical, personal results from an active faith in the risen Christ.

One of the joys of my life has been the enormous privilege I have had in being able to share the gratitude that has come into my life from a life in Christ. It is not just *through* Christ that I have experienced this joy. It is *in* Christ that I have experienced it. Along with Paul, I can share what is central with you and invite you to live in the same joy. I have “learned to be content with whatever I have...I can do all things (in and) through him who strengthens me.” Let us live and rejoice as the “In crowd.”