

Boston

Christ the Redeemer Church
August 30, 2009
Brown Sunday 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 7:1-4
Rev Gary L. Smith
www.christredeemerchurch.com

(Steve Jones Pinky gave and led the Children's Sermon this morning. His subject was New Beginnings having to do with start of school, etc. Steve asked the children if they had any comments about school. One kid said, "Yeah. My friend said his new teacher is a bit..." and we all gasped at what we thought the kid was going to say that the teacher is a bitc.... He finished the word and he said, "The teacher is a bit...strick." We were all relieved and laughter was uncontrollable for Steve and for the rest of us. Kids don't normally use the word "bit" so he scared us a bit.

Later during the sermon, I asked a rhetorical question of "How many have gotten married and wondered what in the world you got yourself into in life?" Glynn Cooper spoke out, "Which time?" and went on to clarify to us that he asked that question the first time he married but not the second time. His lovely second wife, Marsha, sat beside him and was satisfied with that scrambling explanation.)

I have on this beautiful silk Fish tie that Claire gave me last week. It reminds me that the early Disciples were rugged men – fishermen – whose hands were always dirty. This morning's Scripture reading was about when the Church monitors – the Pharisees – whose job was to make sure the many Church laws were followed, criticized Jesus and his Disciples for their not washing their hands properly before eating.

Life is not that clean. You get your hands dirty when living and trying to do right.

In 1996 the Assignments guy in the Air Force asked me if I had any dreams as to where I would like to be stationed the next year. I was coming up for Lt. Colonel and it would be smart to get a big base with a promoteable job. I told Steve that I really wanted a job at a base where my daughter could continue her figure-ice-skating passion.

I needed a base that was near a figure-skating school. I told him I did not want a promotable job but rather a job at a base near an ice skating rink.

He called me a few weeks later and said he found me a base near a pond where it is frigid cold and where folks ice skate outside 8 months out of the year. It was somewhere up near the Canadian border in North Dakota or Minnesota. He laughed.

Turns out we were sent to Hanscom Air Force base outside of Boston, Massachusetts. Russian and European ice skaters move to Boston to train and compete there. Perfect. It was a very small base with little promotion potential. I got condolences phone calls from friends who did not realize I had asked for such an assignment. It was a quiet assignment and not in the fast lane or in the spotlight. Perfect. I was thrilled.

Captain Bill Burrell arrived the same time I did and he worked for me. His wife Natalie was nearly six feet tall and beautiful. She and Pam became dear friends and would walk together nightly, one tall woman and one less tall. Bill and Natalie were African American. We quickly became friends and immensely enjoyed ministering together at this quiet Research base.

The three-star general there had just poured a million dollars into renovating the old colonial-style chapel into a most beautiful facility. When I met him I commented about how beautiful the chapel with its new stained glass, chandeliers, wooden pews, and new altar was. He quipped, "Yes it is beautiful. Now see if you can get some people in it."

I told him I thought the chapel should be like a magnet. He quipped again, "I agree chaplain. It should be like a magnet that attracts people rather than repel people."

Bill and I and the Catholic priest teamed up and started having fun and the chapel started having some people in it. Bill packed the Gospel Service which lasted all Sunday afternoon, Father Sandy packed the Catholic mass which lasted one hour, and others started coming to my service once they heard I gave out Lindt chocolates to all worshippers my first four Sundays there. Word spreads quickly on a little base...word spread that the new chaplain gave short sermons, had a children's sermon and provided crayons to kids in church, got the service over in one hour, liked to laugh, and gave out Lindt chocolates at communion.

We three even swapped pulpits with me preaching at both the Gospel Service and at the Catholic Mass and Father Sandy preaching at the Gospel Service and my Traditional Service. Each year I used chapel money to buy 100 seats in center field at Fenway Park and I have 33 to the Catholics, 33 to the Gospel Service, and 34 to my service. That was one great way to bond the three Faith communities.

Amity bumped into Nancy Kerrigan at the mall one day. That was great. One day I called the base operator on official business and I needed her help and I identified myself as Chaplain Smith. She said, "Are you the new chaplain that gives out chocolate at communion? I would come to church for that." I told her I was and she was in church the next Sunday and came regularly after that.

Then Bill blew it. He wanted to get his hands dirty by helping some folks. He asked me for permission to collect some clothes for some people in Honduras who had lost homes in a recent hurricane. I told him to go for it and to keep me informed.

Then our world got complicated. Bill was too good. Soon he had collected so many clothes that the chapel was filled and he needed another building on base to store the clothes. So he came to me and I helped him get a storage building. It was now *my* problem to find a building for clothes storage.

Then the next thing I knew my quiet little world got complicated due to this Compassion Ministry. Boston is very Catholic and the Catholics and the Gospel Service all got involved in supporting Bill's Clothes to Honduras efforts. Soon the Boston Cardinal's office got interested in helping Bill. That really complicated things.

Then Bill contacted Senator Kennedy's office to seek their endorsement and support. Senator Kennedy was a member of the Senate's Armed Services Committee.

So now the Catholic Cardinal and Senator Kennedy were involved.

Then I asked Bill how all of these clothes were going to get mailed to Honduras. That would cost a ton of money. Bill, by being able to use Senator Kennedy's name and the Cardinal's name, was able to get a Massachusetts Reserve unit to agree to fly a cargo plane down to Honduras to take the massive load of clothes.

Kennedy was never one to miss an opportunity, which meant now it was a great time to promote these efforts of his home state and base on television. This was now becoming a logistical hurricane in my own life as it became a great time for television coverage, a great reunion time for Senator Kennedy, the Catholic Cardinal's staff, and the senior officers on our little Air Force base. It was becoming work.

Then things got complicated. Kennedy's staffers showed up 24 hours ahead of time to make final arrangements for the TV moment. About the time they arrived the Reserves called us and told us their plane had problems and would not be showing up the next day as planned. Television coverage for Senator Kennedy had already been arranged for the next day so the show was going to go on.

Kennedy's staffers took over and just told our general's staff to "get another plane from your runway and park it there just for the television picture and news coverage."

Things got real quiet in our room. Finally our colonel in charge came clean. He said to the young and sharp Kennedy staffer, "Uh, we don't have any airplanes here." I was glad to not be the one who had to say those words.

The young staffer was dumbfounded. He said, "Isn't this an Air Force base?" The colonel nodded and said it is an Air Force Base but that we do not have any planes here. Silence again. The smooth colonel tried to explain that we were a Research and Development Center. We were standing *on* the runway. I was glad to not be the colonel.

We had to find an airplane for Senator Kennedy's television moment. Calls were frantically made by us and soon a cargo plane was headed to us from another state. Not to transport the clothes but to be there for the television coverage. Staged. We spent 24 hours staging the moment...cargo plane at just the right angle, Kennedy's podium with the plane and pallets of clothes stacked behind him, the Cardinal's staff praying over and blessing the clothes.

I was impressed with the staffer's attention to detail on the entire matter. When Senator Kennedy's car and entourage arrived the next day for the show it all went well. The Senator shook each of our hands and thanked us for all of the good work. He never said anything about the borrowed plane that sat behind him for television coverage. But the clothes on palates looked great on television as he spoke on the national news that night, and Hanscom Air Force base survived it all. It was a beautiful picture.

Point this morning? Caring and compassion take a lot of work and your hands get real dirty in the process. Often when you do something good in life it will greatly complicate your life and take over your life. Marriage does that. Having kids does that. Being a church often does not bring peace as much as it brings work and complication. How many of you got married and later wondered what you had gotten into in life? How many times do we become parents and then later ask what we got ourselves into in life? How many have started a church and wondered what we have committed ourselves to doing after we started and our hands were dirty? The Pharisees criticized Jesus and the fishermen-turned-Disciples for not washing their hands properly as religious laws required.

Jesus told them that faith and loving God and loving others is not that simple and easy. Your hands will get dirty when you try to help someone in Honduras when politics and the Church get involved. We will run out of supplies and need airplanes. We may have to depend on others for support. It often gets messy when you love, care, collect clothes, involve politicians, pay bills, raise kids, run a church, try to convert to doing right in life. It is easier to do nothing and keep the Church and politics out of life.

Pinky Jones told me this week he wished he had gotten into Christian networking earlier in his life. What a great summary of the faith. Networking with others who are trying to live a caring life.

Later the Chief of Chaplains asked me what he could do for me. I told him, "Pick Chaplain Bill Burrell to the Pentagon. He deserves it and has a brilliant mind and heart." Send me somewhere close to Auburn University. Bill got the Pentagon and I took Mississippi near Auburn as I wanted. Worked out great.

I loved it yesterday when Kennedy's son said at his father's memorial service that "all vacations with my dad ended with us injured and exhausted." That was the way I felt after the Senator, the Cardinal's staff, and the television crews all left. I felt injured and exhausted. But we did good. And tons of clothes got to the people of Honduras.

Bill and I got promoted after that. He to major and I to Lt. Colonel. Both of us had comments from Senator Kennedy in our promotion files. And some folks in Honduras got some needed clothes. May God bless you this week as you go about helping others. It gets messy doing your jobs and living: your hands get dirty and marriage gets tough and raising kids and running a church is exhausting but it will be worth it all in the end.

Great to be in a church that, like the general said, is like a magnet that attracts people rather than repels people. Amen.