

Sleepy Preachers

Christ the Redeemer Church

January 17, 2010

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Tribute to the Life of Martin Luther King and Chaplain Bill Burrell

John 2:1-11

Rev Gary L. Smith

www.christredeemerchurch.com

I know kick-off for the Dallas Cowboys game is 12 noon today. If you are thinking of committing your life to the Lord at the end of this service, you may want to wait until next week. Today is second-round of the playoffs and folks are leaving this church at 11:30 am, in time to see kick-off. So tell God you will wait to next week to make a commitment to the Lord. Jackie our pianist hates the Cowgirls so she will continue playing the piano here long after y'all have gone home! Note she is wearing Vikings purple!

Jesus surprised them at the wedding ceremony. They ran out of wine and they only had ceremonial hand-washing water in jars. Nothing to drink. He turned the water into wine. He turned the ordinary into special.

I thought Bill was sleeping. He was the African American chaplain who worked for me in Boston. During the worship service he would always go to sleep prior to preaching. I had wanted another chaplain. Assignments gave me Bill, whom I did not know. They said he was good.

The first lunch we had together after he came on staff I asked him where he grew up. He told me a story of how when he was five years old that a decision had to be made in his family as to which family member was going to raise him. He told me about sitting on his grandfather's knee and his grandfather handed the decision to him. At age five he had to decide who would raise him. He could stay with his grandpa or he could go live with other relatives far away in Alabama. A train ride away. He loved his grandpa but he knew at age five the choice was his. He told his grandpa he would go be raised by another relative in another state, a train-ride away. A world away for a 5-year old. He stood up, shook his grandfather's hand and said good-bye, and got on the train to head off into the unknown. At five years of age. I knew then that Bill was special.

I knew then I had a decisive chaplain on the team. I thanked him for telling me that story of his life. We had just met a few days earlier. He looked me in the eye and said, "Chaplain Smith, I have never told that story to anyone else in my life. No one ever asked me before. I trust you with that story."

And he slept in church. And he was the preacher.

When Bill and I arrived on staff that summer there was some tension between the Gospel Service people and the Traditional Service people. Finances and Board processes were at the core of the tension in addition to obvious style tensions. I told Bill that if he and I got

along with each other then the congregations would follow us and start getting along better. He agreed. And our friendship helped bring two congregations together.

Normally he preached an hour in his 3-hour service. I invited him to come and preach in my 1-hour service. I told him he only had about 12 minutes of time to preach. He smiled and said, "Thank you for those 12 minutes." He preached 12 minutes and got us out on time so that the Catholics could start on time following our service. He was good. And he slept in my service also.

He so loved the church and the Lord. He loved his wife. He loved his three children. Even the one he and his wife had late in life. The surprise. The one that startled his wife. He took it in stride and embraced the surprise child as a gift from God. His wife said that was easy for him to say!

No matter what we faced in life as a team, I learned that Bill saw the special in the ordinary. He turned the water into wine in life. And he slept in church. And he was the preacher.

Friday morning 10 of us were able to celebrate with Carla at the clinic as she finished her last radiation treatment at 7 am. We all went to McDonald's for breakfast. My phone was dead and I needed to make a call to the university. Janice loaned me her phone. It was pink. I told her I was embarrassed to use a pink phone. She said that was the point of having a pink phone...so that husbands and preachers would not borrow hers!

The laughter of that moment was Holy for me. I wish I could say that life is getting easier as I get older. But we all know that is not true. But using a pink phone in McDonalds and laughing with friends from church after radiation treatments are over for Carla are Holy moments. The moments are Wine for me. Special. Water into wine.

Friday night our car was vandalized in our driveway. Stereo system ripped out again. Third time in two years that our cars have been vandalized in our own driveway while we were home sleeping. Another stereo system stolen that Daniel had earned money to purchase and had installed in his car.

I teach our children to channel disappointments in life into constructive energy. To turn water into wine. To trim the sails into the wind and convert disappointment into energy.

I am pricing a home security system with a camera this week and I am getting involved politically in knocking on doors in a campaign for one of our own church members this afternoon after the Cowboys game. Time to get more involved in life. We have leaders of two local political parties in our congregation and we all value that balanced presence. I have learned so much from Ed who teaches Political Science at the university. And I will go campaign this afternoon for Bert for County Judge. www.DrBertCobb.com No, this is not a paid political statement. It is a statement of getting involved as an adult. The tone has to be changed in our community and I have to channel my disappointments in life.

(Bert says he may not want me too close to him as he might get vandalized next!)

The Creator of the universe still turns the water into wine. Ordinary people become community leaders. Dreamers.

I finally figured out that Bill was not sleeping during church. He was dreaming. I finally asked him what he was dreaming about with his eyes closed prior to stepping up to the pulpit. He was preparing. He was imagining. He was dreaming of what the church could be. He was dreaming of what he was going to say. He was dreaming of what each person needed to hear from his mouth that day for their lives. God turned an orphaned 5-year old African American child into one of the best chaplains I ever worked with in the Air Force. One of the best pastors I ever met. One of the nicest guys I know. One of the best husbands and fathers in the world. A man with heart and complete integrity. A trusted friend to this day.

I commented to Bill one day that it appeared to me that he had little else in life except for the Church. He smiled and said that I was right. God and the Church were his life.

Bill was offered the largest African American congregation in the Air Force. I asked Bill to decline that offer and to trust me and give me a shot at getting him a two-year internship in the Pentagon for young officers for highest leadership potential. He decided to trust me and take the risk and give me a chance to spend a year trying to get him selected. They pick one chaplain out of 600 chaplains for that internship. Big risk on his part. I worked hard on his behalf for a year to make the risk pay off for him.

When the Chief of Chaplains visited our base and I had 30 seconds to express to him my own career goals when he asked me, "Gary, what do you want me to do for you?" I had one bullet. One shot. I used it for Bill. I said, "My dream is to get Bill Burrell the Internship job in the Pentagon. He deserves it. He is the best I have seen."

Dreams. Thomas Edison said that the reason some of us miss opportunities in life is that opportunity often knocks on our door dressed in coveralls and looking like work.

Yes, God still turns our ordinary, empty vessels into wine. Daily. I see it daily.

Later that year Bill, as a young captain, was the first African American chaplain ever selected for the prestigious two-year Officer Internship Program in the Pentagon. He deserved it, he excelled, and he continues to make me and others very proud to know him.

God loves us enough to sometimes ask us to turn down what appears to be great opportunities in life in exchange for even greater places of service in our lives. We all know that.

Listen to the dreams of Carla and Pinky. The Church is a place where we trust each other with our story. Amen.

