

The Magnetism of Holiness

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
7th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 8, Year A. June 29, 2008. (Text: Genesis 22:1-14)*

When I was living in the Florida panhandle in the early years of my ministry, I often had to drive a couple of hours over to our diocesan camp and conference center in Alabama for meetings. About half-way there, out in the country off the old two-lane beach highway, not the Interstate, was a side road marked at the turn-off by a sign that read: *Glorious Holy Church, 3 miles*. Nothing more, just “Glorious Holy Church, 3 miles” —with an arrow painted below, pointing the way.

I was often tempted, but I never felt like I had the time to turn aside and go down that little road to see the Glorious Holy Church. I was pretty sure it was not going to be an architectural gem. I was not going to find a replica of Westminster Abbey or even a small version of the Crystal Cathedral out there in the north Florida countryside. It would look like a thousand other little churches I’d seen all through the rural South: a white-painted wooden building with a little steeple, surrounded by palmetto bushes, pines, and live oak trees. There’d be a parking area out front, paved only with pine straw.

I didn’t need to drive down that narrow asphalt track to check it out. Intuitively, I knew that the glory and holiness of this little church would have everything to do with the congregation and its sense of identity, and nothing to do with the architecture of its building. The “Glorious Holy Church” had to be a church whose glory was the faithful, consecrated life of its people.

Have you ever known a truly *holy* person? (If you haven’t, you haven’t been hanging out with the right crowd.) The holiness I’m talking about isn’t something decreed by organized religion and certified by a parchment document on the wall, with lots of official seals and signatures at the bottom. Those of us who have been ordained by the church are defined by our churchly vocations and authorized to perform “holy” acts, but that in itself doesn’t make any of us holy people. The Church decided a long time ago that unworthy, even unholy ministers could be used by the Lord to accomplish his works. That’s why the validity of this Eucharist over which I’m presiding today depends, not on any virtue I might have, but on the promise and the power of a Holy God who has chosen to use unworthy human beings like me to be his instruments and humble elements like bread and wine to be the sacrament of his presence.

Holy people are people who live a consecrated life, a life of tested faith. They’re the people among us whose lives are marked by a passion for God. They’re people whom our Pentecostal friends would describe as “sold out to Jesus.” Their ears are attuned, not to the latest Gallup Poll or the latest policy handed down from the hierarchy, but to the whispers of heaven. They’re listening to God, and the main thing they want to do in life is the will of God. Holy people typically have a marvelous knack for unabashedly telling us the painful truths we need to hear – even if we didn’t know we needed to hear them ‘til we heard them! Holy people can be aggravating, because they usually see through our put-ons and pretenses and speak directly to the reality of who we are. They have the kind of courage only found in a single-minded person, a person who’s serving just one Master and who feels answerable only to Him.

Every culture, every age, and every religion has had its holy men and holy women. And we’re no exception. I’m not talking about “Sanctimonious Suzie” or “Holier-than-Thou Harry,” the kind of characters that populate novels written to skewer religious hypocrisy. We all know people like them. And I’m not talking about “professional holy men” or “professional holy women,” who cultivate a national following and have their own TV shows or even their own networks. That’s show biz. I’m talking about men and women who will never be on a TV show and never write a best-seller, but whose holiness shines from their lives and exerts a powerful attraction on those who meet them. Hypocrisy is repulsive; holiness is magnetic. It seems to me that individuals who truly have a desire to know God, and

have a relationship with God, and draw close to God are equipped with a natural, built-in “spiritual depth-finder” that allows them to recognize holy people... and to recognize a holy church.

Holiness is not the by-product of ascetic discipline, like fasting three days a week. It doesn't come from never missing a church service either, or from achieving mastery of the New Testament in the original Greek. Nor is holiness the same thing as the perfect practice of every virtue. *Holiness grows out of being tested by God, and passing the test.* When that has happened to people, it shows in their lives.

Today we hear again about Abraham. And the passage we hear begins with these three words, “God tested Abraham.” It could easily have said, “God decided to test Abraham *again*,” because this wasn't the first time he was tested. The first time was about forty years earlier when a hitherto unknown God spoke to a seventy-five year old, childless, moon-worshipping, middle eastern urbanite and told him to take his wife and adopted nephew and all his possessions and to become a homeless nomad for the rest of his life, journeying by divine directives to an unknown land which this hitherto unknown God promised to give him as an inheritance. (Lots of “unknowns” there!) And, yes, he and his wife would even have a son – although he and the missus were way beyond the age when a little one might be expected to come along. —We talked about Abraham's great adventure in faith a couple of weeks ago. Some of you were here.

The first test was challenging, but the new test was terrifying. God, who was no longer unknown, but intimately known and trusted by Abraham after these forty years said: “*Now take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.*” And Abraham chose to obey God, awful as God's will seemed.

God tested Abraham. God tested his own Son. And it's likely – in fact, it's certain – that God is going to test you and me. And God is going to test this church. *What will we do when God puts us to the test?* Let's hope that, when our time of testing comes, we'll have already learned this from Father Abraham and from the Lord Jesus: “*No matter what happens... no matter WHAT... keep trusting God!*”

Abraham took his only son, the delight of his life, his source of joy and the only assurance that his name would be remembered on earth, and he set out to go to the place of sacrifice. Genesis doesn't tell us, can't tell us, what Abraham was feeling. But we can guess. (Oh, my!) What was he thinking? We can't know that for sure either, but we're told what he answered when Isaac – who knew what sacrifices called for – said, “Papa, here is the fire, the wood, and the knife. But where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham answered, “*God himself will provide the lamb, my son.*” That's the message of this story, perhaps the central message of the Bible itself: *God will provide.* Abraham trusted God, but God *tested* that trust in a way that Abraham could never have imagined in advance.

If we aspire to holiness, if we want to be holy men and holy women – members of a “Glorious Holy Church” – demonstrating the magnetism and courage that goes along with true holiness, we can expect to be tested. You never know how much faith you have until that faith is tested. You will never know whether you're just a fair weather Christian or a year-round, in season and out of season, for better, for worse Christian...until your time of testing comes. If it should be that God brings you to the test – as he brought Abraham, as he brought his only Son, Jesus our Master – will you put your faith in this God and trust him, no matter what happens?...*No matter what?*

How big is *your* God? What claim does God have on your trust? My friends, worshiping God is not a pastime, not just one more thing to do on the weekend. We're here to drink from the River of Life and feed on the Bread of Life so we'll be strong enough to pass the next test that's coming. And that test will come because God has a high goal for us: to be holy people in a Glorious Holy Church!