

Yr. B, Proper 24
October 22, 2006
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields (Healing Mass)
1454 words

Lessons:
Psalm 91
Isaiah 53:4-12
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:35-45

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...by his bruises we are healed.” I speak to you in the name of God—who has suffered with us and whose perfect will for us is health and communion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I must preach this morning about something that is obscene. In fact, the disclaimer I need to make right up front is that this will be a sermon *filled* with obscenities. Before you take your children out or stop listening altogether, let me explain.

A very special teacher shared this observation with me about a year ago. She noted that obscene originally meant action that took place “off the stage, out of sight.” While the word has evolved and taken on the connotation of something that is repulsive or morally abhorrent, the earliest expression of the idea referred to the theatre, and particularly to that which was “off the ‘scene,’ i.e. off the stage, or out of sight.”

As enlightening as the etymology of this term was for me, what was positively stunning is what she observed next. My teacher remarked that “the only things that are obscene in America today are sickness, old age and death.”

Think about it...when you look at the front page of the newspaper what is on “center stage?” Congressman Mark Foley’s perverted instant messaging texts....stories and pictures depicting terrible violence and hatred. These things are not obscene—i.e. “out of sight.” They are vulgar—i.e. common, and they are *center stage!*

We have a giant problem in our very sick American culture. That which should be acknowledged publicly and held in common—held in communion—are the very things that we deny and pretend do not exist.

Sickness is common, old age is common, death is common; and we are so afraid of these realities that all we can do is tuck them safely away—off the stage, well out of sight and sound.

Why do we tolerate the very artificial and contorted nonsense about patient privacy? While there is value in protecting patients from opportunistic marketing or abusive underwriting practices by insurers, I have personally experienced an absurd degree of folly in the medical community about “honoring” patient privacy to the degree that we have isolated and cut off the sick from those who might be willing and able to help offer them care.

It is not just a legislative problem, As a newly ordained minister, I am astonished at just how frequently those who are at a point of potentially experiencing the greatest benefit of pastoral support from family, friends and clergy are oftentimes the same people who just vanish from the radar screen.

Our culture’s game of pretend and denial about sickness is obscene. And it is deplorable.

Old age is common, and we don't like it.

Just consider the advertisements for vitamins and the brochures for retirement communities and assisted living facilities. They are filled with bright, shiny, silver-headed teenagers. The only place that old age is unashamedly center stage is in the common areas of our nursing homes. It can be painful to see and hear the manifestations of old age, and so you know what we do—we avoid looking at it and listening to it. When is the last time you visited a nursing home (other than to visit an immediate family member) and slowed down long enough to acknowledge the humanity clustered around the common area?

Our culture's game of pretend and denial about old age is obscene. And it is deplorable.

Death is common, and we don't like it.

Consider the very dignified and beautifully appointed caskets and hearses and even bronze markers we use to cover our dead and keep them safely off the stage. Consider the notorious Astroturf that funeral homes *insist* on using at gravesides to conceal the dirt, the very earthiness of what it means to say that “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.”

Our culture's game of pretend and denial about death is obscene. And it is deplorable.

On the other hand, we look back at the newspaper and the television and we see the perversion of using bodies for advertising, we experience the abuse of demanding that our children grow up before their time to grow up, we absorb the violence of torturing and killing our enemies, we are entertained by the betrayals of those who have supposedly made lifelong vows—these are the things at the very center of our identity. They are center stage...common...and therefore, vulgar.

With God's help, St. Martin's will be a place where things are different. And that is what the liturgy this morning is all about! We are going to take sickness, old age, broken heartedness, and death and put it center stage. Right here in the center of our nave, right here in the center of our common life...our common prayer.

Where do we begin? We begin with the understanding that we are *all* broken. You've heard about the psychologist who observed that 90% of all families are dysfunctional and the other 10% are in denial.

Yes. We are all broken and in need of God's healing. *You* believe it to...I've heard you say it in the Nicene Creed... “*for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.*” What we are really confessing at that point in the Creed are the words from Isaiah, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...by his bruises we are healed.”

Once we acknowledge our own brokenness and our own need for God's healing, we are in a position to pray—for ourselves and for others in need of God's healing.

For a number of weeks now, *you* have kept the prayers of the people—and not just for 15 minutes during worship on Sunday morning. Many of you have carried the names of those on our prayer list home with you and kept the intercessions throughout the week.

Well today is the next step. We are inviting everyone in our parish community who seeks healing to come forward and receive prayers as well as laying on of hands and anointing by our priests. You see, this morning the prayers of the people are becoming *even more* incarnate. Do you want to know why? Because incarnation is precisely how our God operates. Incarnation is the divine *modus operandi*!

If it feels a little vulnerable to participate in this incarnation of the prayers, your instinct is right—because incarnation is a vulnerable thing *now*—just like it was in that manger in Bethlehem.

While incarnation is a little vulnerable, it is overwhelmingly transformative—for everyone around—just like it was for the shepherds minding their flocks near Bethlehem.

We are all together in this—one communion, one body—a body in need of healing.

And we need to stand apart from the culture—we need to invite those we love, those who are sick, those who are in the midst of broken heartedness, those who are dying—we need to invite these persons to the center of our common prayer and our common life, and we need to offer them up to God for healing and wholeness. It is God’s will, and it is our mission.

I want to close this homily with a portion of a letter that was passed along to me this past week when I was in the middle of writing this sermon. It is a letter written by child to a relative who is dying.

It is one of the most pastoral and theologically profound things I have ever read, and it beautifully conveys the essence of what I am trying to say in this sermon about God, about healing, and about our life with God and with one another. The child wrote as follows:

Isn’t it amazing how many strings are in a 10 x 10 foot rug?
All the little strings fit in perfectly, and there are many of them. They are all different colors making different parts of the rug. And once the rug is completed it is a beautiful masterpiece!

Well that is what the world is like, each person makes up the world in different ways, like the rug, and each person does something different to it, changing its color, and design, as they are woven in.

Right now I am looking at this big, gigantic rug and it is beautiful. I bet God sees the world like a rug, something beautiful, resembling Him, like a rug resembles the artist who wove it. I bet you are in the very center of the rug!

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...by his bruises we are healed.”
Amen.