

February 20, 2020

“Our mission is to celebrate God’s transforming Love in Jesus, by following where Jesus’ Love is calling us to serve the community”



Ascension This Week

More On Black and White — from Fr Bill Baker

On Sunday, February 23

- 8 am Said Eucharist
- 10 am Sung Eucharist
- 11:15 Coffee Hour
- 2:30 pm Service at Lakeside Manor

Inside this issue:

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- Photos from the Feb 16 Friendship Dinner
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Sometimes I preach a sermon and I forget what I said very quickly. But more often, I preach and because I have been wrestling with the text and trying to put myself into the words in order to understand what God might want us to understand from the “Word”, I continue to think about the concepts for days or weeks. Often, the minute I finish, I think, “Oh, I wish I had said this or that.” And because sermons need to be relatively short, there often isn’t enough time to use as many examples as I might like.

This week, I thought and prayed a lot about the sermon. I almost preached about Biblical literalism and in the coming weeks, I might write a newsletter article about it or include it in a sermon. However, the last few days, I keep thinking a lot about how life is not “Black and White”—how Christian faith isn’t black and white, all right or all wrong.

The field of psychology have come up with a model for mental health to counter the strict rigidity of black and white, all right or all wrong thinking. It is called harm reduction. The harm reduction model encourages people to reduce harmful behaviors until you are able to quit them completely. Using smoking as an example, my dad quit cold turkey. That works for some people, but it doesn’t work for most people. Instead, most people reduce their smoking habit until they smoke one or two a day and then finally quit.

How might this model might work with other behaviors, especially for Christians? I have thought about how, even though we make a choice to incline our hearts to God, it doesn’t inoculate us from adversity or mean that we will not sin. I mentioned in my sermon that we all need to protect our hearts against lusting or hating, because allowing those feelings to go unchecked, can lead to worse behavior.

It might seem simple to appreciate a beautiful body. We all do that. But our appreciation can turn into leering and the leering might lead us to lust or worse--saying something offensive and inappropriate. This leads to objectification of another person, and once we allow and accept this behavior, we might think it is okay to touch someone, harass them or worse.

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We need to be careful. The same thing happens with our anger. We can feel justified in our anger, but it can quickly turn to hate and a desire for revenge. Fortunately, we have God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. We all will stumble. We might even fall, but we, too, can use the harm reduction model as Christians and in our faith lives, and once we recognize our sins, turn our hearts back to God and ask for forgiveness. Asking God to help us work on our anger issues or our struggle to care for our bodies by eating healthier diets and making better food choices.

It isn't black and white, that becomes clear. Using the concept of food choices, we all know that we must eat. However, lots of foods that taste good are not good for us, especially in large portions. I know I continue to try and find a balance with diet and exercise in order to take care of the body that God gave me. Yes, I still eat bagels and cookies. So my harm reduction includes using an app to track my food choices and the calories consumed.

I can't go cold turkey and eat only vegetables and chicken breast. That means, that I need to try and figure out what balance of foods fuel my body and make me feel healthy while not completely denying myself all unhealthy food.

You might think how do lust and anger and over eating relate to each other and being a Christian? First, almost anything can cause us to struggle if we abuse it. Our struggles to be Christian can include many temptations and our temptations are a varied as we are as humans. Second, sin, or the stuff that takes us away from the knowledge and love of God, can be tricky.

Anger is a natural emotion. We all get angry, but we need to make sure that we do not allow anger to get the best of us or let others convince us that we are allowed to be so angry that we think that our rage or getting revenge are justified.

In short, just because we incline our hearts to God, does not mean that we will not face challenges. We will always find adversity in life. However, with our lives more and more focused on God, we will notice these challenges more quickly. When we notice a beautiful person or our anger boiling up, we can pray in that very moment and ask God to help us. If we find ourselves struggling with food or alcohol, we can acknowledge our faults more quickly, ask for forgiveness, if necessary and move on.

The more we are tested, the easier it should become. If you were once a dirty joke teller, but now you notice beautiful women and then move on, give thanks to God for helping you protect your heart. As we reduce the harm, we grow closer to God. (Or maybe it is the other way around, as we grow closer to God, we learn to reduce the harm.) Only God knows really, but it is God that we must rely on. Incline your heart to God, forsaking the all or nothing, black and white thinking, and keep working on doing better each day.

Blessings, Fr Bill+



People from different faiths and different churches on Staten Island gathered at Ascension on February 16 for a Friendship Dinner. Go on Facebook to [Church of Ascension Staten Island](#) to see more photos from this event.





Beginning Thursday, March 5th at 7:00 pm Fr. Bill will host the first Lenten Series & Soup Suppers in the Rectory. This year the Lenten Series- "The Signs of Life", from the SSJE, explores the signs and symbols at the heart of Christian worship. This free 5-week offering encourages individuals and groups to explore the riches of our worship traditions, liturgy and sacraments, and the art and architecture of our worship spaces, revealing the full meaning of these signs, deepening our experience of Christian vocation and guiding us toward ongoing conversion.

Light: When we see by the light of Christ, everything that is close to us, things as simple and as vital as light and water and food and shelter and community – everything – is transformed into a vehicle of grace. ...

Water: ... Baptism is a sacrament of surrender, the sacramental act of letting go of fear and control, making friends with the unknown, and beginning to trust that God will sustain you, even in the midst of chaos and death.

Food: When we remember food is life, we gain a better understanding of what it means to ask God to give us our daily bread . . .

Shelter: The liturgy itself shelters us, the same patterns unfolding, again and again, day by day, week by week, year by year. ...

Community: Being in loving relationship means that the truth of our very selves will be revealed.

Save the Date: Upcoming Services, Meetings and Events:

Sunday, February 23: Fourth in the Black history Month Educational series at Christ Church, 4:00—6:00 pm. Topic is "Frederick Douglas Memorial Park" presented by Duane Felton, Esq. Refreshments will be served.

Tuesday, February 25: Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper, 6:00pm, at Ascension served with sausage, fruit & coffee, masks and beads. Our treat! Freewill donation only. Colorful clothes and costumes are encouraged.

Thursday, March 5: The first meeting of the Lenten Study Group at Ascension at 7:00 pm in the rectory. See the flyer in this newsletter for details.

Saturday, March 14: St Patrick's dinner with DJ and dancing, St John's Church on Bay Street.

Lenten Service at St. Alban's Church: The IPC Lenten Committee is planning an Evening Prayer Service with hymns to be held at **St. Alban's Church on Sunday, March 15th at 4:00 pm.** The theme of the service will follow the SSJE 2020 Lenten study "Signs of Life - Why Church Matters - Light / Water / Food / Shelter / Community."

Sunday, March 15: The next monthly Friendship Dinner is Sunday, March 15, 5:30 to 7:30 at the Unitarian Church of Staten Island, 312 Fillmore St., SI 10301, next to Snug Harbor. This is a wonderful opportunity to socially meet those of other faiths bringing us together through the One common to us all: God. It is Pot Luck and you are asked to bring a vegetarian dish.

Please join us at **5:00 pm on Saturday, March 21**, and every third Saturday of the month for a **healing service at Ascension.** As many of you know, Arthur Ullstrom has a spiritual gift of healing prayer. On February 15 he will be joined by Dcn. Geri and Fr Bill for the laying on of hands and prayer for healing.



On Saturday, March 28, Fr Mark Brown will hold a Lenten Retreat Day at Ascension from 9 am to 2:30 pm. **"Slow Down: Resurrection Ahead"** We will conclude our time of retreat with a celebration of the holy Eucharist. Refreshments and lunch will be provided.

Saturday, May 9: Save the Date for the Episcopal Church Women's Annual Meeting. More information will follow closer to the date.

