



February 2, 2014

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 2:22-40

Living a Life of Gratitude

—The Very Rev. Dr. Neal Michell

Introduction: I was not a Good Student

I was not a very good student in my early years of elementary school. I was mostly a B and C student. In the first grade when we were assigned to reading groups, I was placed in the third, the “slow” group.

There were a couple of reasons for this.

First, I needed glasses. And no one realized it until I was in the fourth grade. Now, most of you have never seen me in glasses, but mine are of the Coke bottle bottom kind. Somehow, no one noticed me squinting.

Second, I was what we called back then “rambunctious.” I could not sit still. I would rather talk to somebody than sit still.

Third, I tried to read too fast. I would often mispronounce a word and by the time I was in the middle of the next word, I realized that I had said the wrong previous word.

I remember looking at my brothers’ 4th Grade report cards with their plethora of “A’s” and wondering why I didn’t make “A’s.”

Unbeknownst to my teachers, I was actually a very avid reader. We always had books at home. For Christmas I would get a couple of toys, a couple of shirts, and a couple of books. We had encyclopedias in our home, and I would read them. You could usually find an encyclopedia on the floor next to my bed.

However, my love of reading didn’t really translate into good grades at school. My family considered me smart. The Michell boys were all smart, but my first four teachers, ehh, not so much.

How did this rambunctious, nearsighted little boy go from “Bs” and “Cs” to graduating from law school and practicing law to getting a doctorate?

The key to what happened in my life is found in our Gospel reading today.

Three Ceremonies: Jesus Presented in the Temple

Our Gospel passage shows Jesus undergoing three ancient ceremonies which every Jewish boy had to undergo.

1. Circumcision
2. The Redemption of the Firstborn
3. The Purification after Childbirth

Circumcision

Every Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. So important was that ceremony that it could even be performed on a Sabbath when so many other things were prohibited.

The Redemption of the Firstborn

The parents gave to the priest five shekels—approximately \$45—to buy back the child.

The Purification after Childbirth

When a woman gave birth to a child, she was considered unclean and had to stay away from the Temple worship: for 40 days if she gave birth to a boy and 80 days if she gave birth to a girl. So, for this period of time she was released from responsibility to attend the worship in the Temple so she could focus her attention on caring for her newborn baby. Upon re-entering the worship community she would bring an offering of a lamb. If they were poor, they could bring a pair of pigeons. This was the offering that Mary brought. It was considered the offering of the poor.

We make look at these ceremonies with either a critical or humorous eye, thinking them quaint. Certainly out-dated. But behind all three of them is the conviction that a child is a gift from God. When we raise a child, we are raising that child for God.

The child is not ours, he or she is only on loan.

At the heart of these three ceremonies is the understanding that life is a gift from God. The firstborn male belonged to God, and the parents had to buy that child back from God. Through circumcision the child was marked as God’s. And all we do in life should be done in gratitude for the life God has given us.

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In a very special way, of course, Mary and Joseph understood that they had a special obligation in raising this child, Jesus, this one who would save the people from their sins. And they were grateful for that charge.

Well, I did get glasses in the fourth grade, and then in the fifth grade I had a teacher that changed my view about myself. She called me "Egghead."

I had no idea what an egghead was, so I looked it up and realized that my teacher, Mrs. Martin, thought I was smart, so maybe I was.

It was then that I thought I could do well in school, and, in fact, I started making "A's." In the fifth and then sixth grade I was the school Spelling Bee champion. I made "A's" in all my courses, uhm, except Penmanship and Citizenship.

I will always be grateful for Mrs. Martin for seeing in me what I did not see in myself.

Conclusion

The point is this: all you are and all you have is a gift from God.

We lay no claim to life. We lay no claim to our intellect. We lay no claim to our parentage.

You could have been born in a mud hut in Moolah-Moolah, South Africa. (Yes, that is a real place.) Yet, you were born in a place of prosperity and opportunity.

The key to living a fulfilling life is to live a life of gratitude.

Are you grateful?

I must tell you that I am grateful to Mrs. Martin for seeing in me more than I could see myself.

Are you grateful for those teachers who believed in you? Encourage you?

Are you grateful for the mother and/or father who worked hard to provide a house? food? Motivation?

Are you grateful to God for the gift of life and intellect and determination?

As the hymn reminds us:

To give and give and give again as God hath given thee,

To spend thyself nor count the cost, to serve right gloriously

The God who made all worlds that are

And all that are to be.

Only if at the bottom of our soul is gratitude can we reach out beyond ourselves.

Only if we are truly grateful will we be able to love the unlovely.

Only if we are truly filled with gratitude can we continue to give to the poor and needy and marginalized in an ongoing way. Oh, we might be able to give once or twice, but unless we view all our gifts, our life, our health as a gift from God, we will eventually run out of steam in caring for others.

Let me ask you two questions:

- (1) What does your appointment calendar say about your gratitude to God for all he has given you?
- (2) And. What does your checking account say about your gratitude to God for all he has given you?