

Homily by Deacon Susie Fowler Kenny

Over the past three Sundays, three of our members have spoken in ways that make it clear to me that their lives are oriented each day to what we celebrate today, Christ the King. Each spoke to the rest of us gathered, eloquently and honestly sharing themselves and the reasons they are faithfully here. They told us why the Church matters to them, why they support her by offering their selves to her work, and why they give to St. Mark's a pledged portion of their financial means.

Elise ignored her fear of speaking publicly and shared with us how important to her is the work she hears commanded in the Gospel, feeding the hungry in particular, but reaching out in general to any who have little or nothing at all. Her giving is a natural result of her wholehearted acceptance of responsibility and love for neighbor, and love for God.

Carol told us of her own personal and even painful path to St. Mark's, and how it came down one day to an immediate decision: to join our community or not—an act of faith, really, and a willingness to be guided by that which is much larger than any of us. She found a community that sustains and strengthens her, and her response has been generosity to that community.

Kyle spoke to us, too, about a deeply personal journey to St. Mark's, a story that surely resonated with many of us. He spoke of his suspecting all along, and seeking in his heart all along, and thankfully finding here, what it turns out Ezekiel says to us this morning: God's primary interests are not wrath, but love; not punishment, but righteousness; not fear, but faith; not condemnation, but an embrace so gentle and constant that it cannot be forever ignored.

Ezekiel's particular words, "I will bring back the strayed, I will strengthen the weak," have very personal meaning to me. I found my own way back to the Church and St. Mark's 18 years ago, after previously rejecting institutional religion, believing I could love God without it. In that rejection, though, I found my own self and its egocentricity, and the world I live in with its tenacious fracture, had only served to build forgetfulness of that which is greater than the Church I had rejected—God and Jesus Christ, of whom I had once been so keenly aware.

My return (after 20 years away) was sparked by a particular evening when I had removed myself to a chair in my backyard, downcast by the news being broadcast on television and written in the newspapers, struggling against it all and against myself as if I had stuffed a suitcase too full, but insisted it close anyway. The anxiety, frustration (sadness, really), threatened to result in apathy and resignation and the stance that the best I could do—the only thing I could do—was ignore the world, close my eyes to it, and look after what was mine. Somehow in this abyss, though, I became aware of the surprising presence of God—gentle, understanding, whole, unmistakable—a presence I had long before dismissed and then completely forgotten: an amnesia. Particularly important and hopeful was that this was clearly not *for me*, except that I was a part of the world that God's presence *was* so clearly *for*, the whole world and everyone in it. Now the result wasn't that I was suddenly at peace with the world, or that I believed for a minute that God was terribly delighted with its goings on, but that there was, indeed, God's embrace around all of us that I could no longer forget.

It took me some time, but one Sunday morning I timidly arrived here in time for the 10 o'clock Mass. That Sunday, as I held out my hands to receive the body of Christ for the very first time, I was as excited as a child going to a birthday party, but I was also a bit afraid. I think fear wasn't altogether

inappropriate. To receive Christ through the sacrament of Eucharist is to forever work to change things: in us, in our perceptions, expectations, convictions, actions, how we regard the world and our place in it. When we hold forth our hands to receive this very humble meal, we receive—maybe secretly for some time, but nonetheless in reality—the Incarnation of God in Christ, present in inexpressible manner; a sharing with Mary as she receives the body of her son from the cross; and the Resurrection of Christ and its life giving promise, and its hope, and its call. Yet truly shattering that morning, in needful and wonderful ways, was that this was not a purely personal moment either, but was that which I had once despaired of being real—nurture and joy and purpose in community, each of us receiving individually, but also as one; receiving together promise, hope and yes, very sure call.

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Through the sacraments God lays claim to our lives, and we in turn claim the blessing of God's claim on us. The Church and her sacraments serve also to keep our memories intact—a constant and loving reminder that God is indeed present, and is indeed calling each of us to purpose and meaning and wholeness and peace, strengthening us as we each need to be strengthened. Therese of Lisieux said: “He does not come down from heaven to lie in a golden ciborium. He comes to find another heaven which is infinitely dearer to him—the heaven of our souls, the living temples of the adorable Trinity.” Yet the sacraments move us beyond their particular moments. They open us to the whole of our lives, that they might be lived in all ways sacramentally; and they open us more fully to the world, that we might regard it in all ways sacramentally; so that all that is and all that we are and all that we do become more and more truly: outward and visible signs of God's grace upon grace. If our hands stretch out here and receive God's grace through Eucharist, the response of our hearts must be our hands stretched out in the world and through the detail of our lives to give of the grace received.

It is the Church that helps us remember from whom we have received all that we have received, and so the Church has never been more important than she is today, with all the competing claims on our affections, endless and constantly created and revised, on our time, and on our trust. It is through the Church that we acknowledge regularly and consistently and without fail, because it is true, that what has been given through the Incarnation and Christ's Resurrection are sufficient: to allay the fear that would otherwise stand in the way of participating in Christ's reign; to allay the fear that we have only our own selves to guide us; and to build in us the ability to give an increasingly confident “Yes” to the ways God calls us to serve one another, the stranger, creation itself, and the ways God will call us to serve tomorrow.

Yet in spite of this, amnesia seems chronic as church membership declines, or as the Church is given less and less priority in the lives of even those who believe. Pick up any newspaper; listen to any news broadcast. Talk to any neighbor; pay attention to even your most immediate surroundings. Clearly we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Clearly the Church, and the Gospel that is Christ's, matters—mattering more and more as it is more and more forgotten, or dismissed by more and more.

And so I worry for the Church, because I worry for the world. The world needs the Church, needs this visible and active sign of God's presence in the world, and this visible and active sign must grow: in

members; in wisdom, prophecy and reach; in imagination; in charity; and in an influence that is centered only on the goodness and the love of God and the perfection of Christ's Gospel.

And yet membership is declining. Parishes are drying up, sometimes blowing away. And all too often we, the members, are too timid to speak of our faith. It is enormously important—enormously important—that each of us do what Elise, Carol and Kyle did here these past three Sundays, and that we take that out into the world and into our lives. We must share ourselves and our faith and our church. It is central to the Gospel. The world *needs* the Church, and I believe the world needs St. Mark's. I believe she is worthy of our attention and commitment, and our desire to share her.

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The Vestry of St. Mark's will soon develop a budget for the coming calendar year, never an easy or breezy task. There is a level of worship, community and charity here we believe we are called by Christ to maintain. There is a level of worship, community and ministry we believe God may be calling us to expand upon or introduce. There is a presence in our surrounding community and even well beyond that we believe we are called to be. And yet not one of these things to which we are called is possible without your commitment, your time, your ideas, and your financial help. The Church is our best source of nourishment and spiritual growth, but her members are what sustain *her*. This morning we will gather your pledge cards and offer them to God in faith and in thanksgiving for God's love and blessings, and in thanksgiving for the blessing of you, for your commitment, for your care, and above all for your memory. *Amen.*