

PENTECOST 2B – June 3, 2018

Your Slaves for Jesus' Sake

(2 Corinthians 4:5-12)

Sir Oliver Franks was a distinguished British gentleman. He served as a professor of philosophy at Oxford, was a president of several different colleges and, at one point, even was the chairman of a major bank. And if this resume was not enough, Sir Oliver Franks also served for a time as the British ambassador to the United States. This was perhaps his most demanding job of all, since he served as ambassador immediately following the Second World War; at a time when the Cold War was just beginning and tensions with the former Soviet Union were escalating.

As ambassador to the U.S., Sir Franks was in touch – often on a daily basis – with the American President on one side of the Atlantic, and the Prime Minister of Great Britain on the other. In this capacity, he was also the confidant of some of the most powerful people in the world. Therefore, he frequently needed to get urgent, important, and top secret messages back and forth between Washington and London.

Now it was far too risky to make telephone calls; the line was almost certainly bugged, even in that day and age. So there was a diplomatic pouch that went back and forth each day, bringing confidential documents by air across the Atlantic Ocean. And that was the method he used for most of his important and confidential messages.

But when something was *really* confidential, utterly and completely top secret, he wouldn't trust it to the diplomatic pouch which everyone *knew* was important and, therefore, might try to somehow intercept. So, in

these instances, he would put the letter or document in an ordinary envelope and then send it through the regular mail. You see, he gambled that no one would *ever imagine* that an ordinary envelope sent through the regular mail would be carrying such a top secret letter or document...

Well, in our second reading this morning, what the apostle Paul is basically saying here is that God has done pretty much the same thing. In other words, that there is absolutely no chance of anyone ever confusing the extraordinary *content* of the envelope with the very *ordinary* and unremarkable envelope itself. The messenger, or the vessel, that *carries* the message is not important; not important at all. What *matters*, vitally and urgently, is the message itself! “We have this treasure in clay jars,” wrote Paul, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

“For we do not proclaim ourselves,” he made perfectly clear, “we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your *slaves* for Jesus’ sake.” To put it quite simply, then, Jesus is the message; the utterly important and *extra-ordinary* message. While Paul himself, and anyone else who proclaims Christ to the world, are merely ordinary, earthenware pots. Nothing special or unique or noteworthy in and of themselves...

And so Paul, in effect, is saying here that our heroes of the faith, our heroes in the Bible, as well as all the heroes down through the ages of church history, are just ordinary people – like you and me – who have nevertheless been given the awesome privilege and opportunity of sharing God’s extraordinary power and message with others...

Now when I was preparing to preach this morning, I noticed something interesting in the worship resource produced by the ELCA's Augsburg Fortress Publishing House called *Sundays and Seasons*. Besides listing the scripture lessons assigned for the day, as well as sample prayers and possible hymn selections, *Sundays and Seasons* also lists the lesser festivals, commemorations and occasions that fall, either on that particular Sunday itself, or during the following week.

Now typically, there are two or three such festivals or commemorations listed in this way. But *this* week I noticed that there were actually *seven*, including six individuals, the six heroes of the faith that I identified during my children's message, and now want to say a little more about with you as well.

Here's another thing about these festivals, commemorations, and occasions. When it's a *person* being remembered on a particular day, the day chosen for that individual is typically the day he or she died. And so it is, in fact, for the person remembered on the church calendar for June 3.

Born "Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli" in the year 1881 in a small country village in the Lombardy region of Italy, he was the eldest son and fourth overall in a family of 13 children. His parents, like most of the people in that village, were simple peasants who worked as sharecroppers.

Despite such humble beginnings, however, Roncalli went on to earn a doctorate in Canon Law in 1904, and that very same year was also ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. He later became the much beloved Bishop of Venice with a warm affection for working class people like his own family of origin. He was also remembered for

developing social-action ministries. Finally, at the age of 77, he was elected pope – and thereafter became known as Pope John XXIII.

Despite the expectation, because of his advanced age, that he would simply be a *transitional* pope, he nevertheless had great energy and spirit. And so it's not surprising then that he convened the Second Vatican Council which, in many ways, opened up the Catholic Church to the modern world and also ushered in a period of great change; particularly in worship and also in how the Catholic Church related to other Christian bodies, including Lutherans.

Yet through it all, Pope John retained both his humility as well as his sense of humor. For example, when asked by a reporter how many people worked in the Vatican, Pope John answered – without missing a beat – “Oh... about half of them!”

On another occasion he admitted waking up one morning worrying about a problem. So he said to himself, “I’ll have to consult the Pope about this.” Then he thought to himself, “Wait a minute. I *am* the Pope!”

And when a painter once came to paint his portrait, Pope John told the artist, “If you paint my face, paint it warts and all.” In other words, he didn't want to embellish or cover up the true image of himself. He wanted to be honest in all that he said or did...

For we do not proclaim *ourselves*, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake...

Pope John XXIII did not live long enough to see the Vatican Council he had called together, and which brought about such significant changes, through to its completion. He died of stomach cancer on this day, June 3, in 1963. But his impact on the Church, not just the Catholic Church, is still being felt today...

Then, on June 5, in the year 754, a man with the given name of “Winfrid” died a martyr’s death along with 52 others. He is perhaps better known to us, however, as Boniface – which means “good deeds.”

Born to a noble family in Wessex, England, Boniface instead – and against his father’s wishes – chose a life for himself in the church as a monk. As a Benedictine monk, he taught in the abbey school and even wrote the first Latin grammar ever produced in England. Later, when the abbot of the monastery died, Boniface was expected to take over. However, he declined the position, and set out to be a missionary in what is today the Netherlands and Germany where he later lost his life.

It is said that, during this time, Boniface once came across some men who were about to offer up a child sacrifice to Thor. Boniface stopped the murder of this child by pointing out a fir tree, telling them that it was the tree of life. “This tree does not die in winter like others,” he pointed out to them, “but lives and it symbolizes the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ.”

He then noted that the shape of the fir tree is triangular and therefore it represents the Trinity of God. Upon this declaration, as the story goes, the men repented and gave their hearts to Jesus and the boy’s life was spared. It was also through this that Boniface came to be credited with the invention of the Christmas tree as well.

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake...

Seattle was a Native American chief of the Suquamish tribe who later became chief of the Duwamish Confederacy; a tribal alliance. As a young chief, Seattle was a skilled military strategist and was involved in many inter-tribal disputes, conflicts; including open warfare.

However, in 1848, after the death of one of his sons in a battle against a rival tribe, he and his remaining children received baptism in the Roman Catholic church near Olympia, Washington. His conversion to Christianity marked his emergence as a leader who sought friendship and cooperation with the American settlers. Chief Seattle realized that the advance of the powerful and numerous settlers could not be stopped. And his conversion to Christianity marked the end of his fighting days.

He then began the practice of leading morning and evening prayer in his tribe; a practice that continued even after his death on June 7th 1866. As you might have guessed by now, the city of Seattle, Washington was named in his honor...

Then there are three more heroes of the faith, all of whom are remembered on June the 9th. In our Lutheran tradition, these three men are remembered as so-called "Renewers of the Church." That is, individuals who, through their lives, have significantly contributed to the development and vitality of the Christian church.

These three are all monks from the British Isles who were pillars of the faith, and who kept alive the light of learning and devotion during the so-called Dark Ages.

The first, Columba, was an Irish abbot and missionary credited with spreading Christianity in what is today Scotland. In all, he founded three monasteries; including one on the island of Iona off the *coast* of Scotland, which became a dominant religious and political institution in the region for centuries. He did, in fact, die on June 9 in the year 597 at the age of 75.

The second, who died in 651, was named Aidan. He helped bring Christianity to the Northumbria area of England, and was known for his pastoral style and his ability to stir people to charity and good works.

During his years as a missionary, Aidan was responsible for the construction of churches, monasteries, and schools *throughout* Northumbria. At the same time, he earned a tremendous reputation for his pious charity and dedication to the less fortunate – such as his tendency to provide room, board, and education to orphans. And his use of contributions to pay for the freedom of slaves.

It was later written of Aidan:

He was one to traverse both town and country on foot, never on horseback, unless compelled by some urgent necessity, and wherever in his way he saw any, either rich or poor, he invited them; if infidels to embrace the mystery of the faith or if they were believers to strengthen them in the faith, and to stir up by words and actions to alms and good works.

Those words describing Aidan were actually written by the third of our “Renewers of the Church.” His name was Bede. Often he is referred to as the “Venerable” Bede.

Bede was a Bible translator and scholar of the scriptures. He wrote a history of the English church entitled *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. He was also the first historian to date events “anno domini” (A.D.), or in the “year of our Lord.” Bede is also known for his hymns, including the text for “A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing,” which is our hymn of the day this morning. He died in A.D. 735.

But in reading about Bede, there was one quote attributed to him that really caught my attention and encapsulates, I think, the whole point of our second reading this morning, and also captures the essence of these six men remembered by the church this morning and in the coming days.

Bede is quoted as once saying, “I was no longer the center of my life and therefore I could see God in everything.”

I was no longer the *center* of my life... and *therefore* I could see God in everything...

It reminds me of something a classmate of mine in graduate school used to say to us. He was an Episcopal priest and his name was Ed Cromey. In fact, whenever one of our professors would ask a question, or ask one of us to read, and would begin Ed Cro... I would always sit up straight in my seat, not knowing if he was going to complete it by saying Ed Cro... mey or Ed Kro... pa.

Well anyway, my friend Ed Cromey, once told us that there is a saying in the Episcopal Church that goes something like this: “When a priest gives up trying to become a bishop... he finally becomes a good priest.”

In other words, whenever an Episcopal priest finally gives up the dream of becoming a bishop; with all the power and authority, and attention and notoriety that goes along with it, only *then* can he or she finally focus on the work and calling of parish ministry. And be a true servant of the gospel.

As the Venerable Bede once said, when I was no longer the center of my life, when my own goals and desires were no longer my sole focus; then, and only then, could I see God in everything and therefore begin to focus on others and on the world *outside* of myself.

The gift that John XXIII, Boniface, Chief Seattle, Columba, Aidan, and Bede *all shared*, despite the many and obvious differences between them, was that they all – in their own unique way – no longer saw themselves as the center of their own lives. Instead, there was someone, and something – a cause – *far greater* than themselves. That someone was Jesus Christ. And that cause was the spreading of the Gospel. And, in response, each of these men then devoted their lives entirely to Christ and the Gospel.

Ordinary men who did extraordinary things, not because of who *they were* but because of who *God is*, and because of the power of God working in and through their lives. An example – dare I say – that you and I can probably learn from...

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

