

But we press on

Today is Consecration Sunday for St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It's an important day in the life of Episcopal parishes, but this year it is especially important for us, as we prepare our parish for the calling of a rector.

The stakes are high. Opportunity is in the air.

Consecration means: “the action of making something sacred”. It is to take something profane—something of our secular world—and set it apart for God's purpose. In our tradition—we usually think about consecration in the Eucharist; we bring forth the bread and wine from our world...place on the Table; the Priest invites the Holy Spirit to consecrate them, to make them Holy.

As I was thinking about what it means to make our *stewardship gifts* sacred, I remembered the story of a young woman who served her parish as its junior warden. The church was growing and expanding its programs. The church had just begun construction on a new parish hall when the junior warden learned she had cancer. She was in her mid-30s with 5 children at home. To say her plate was full would be an understatement.

Shortly into her treatment program, she learned that the cancer would not be cured; her time was short. Rather than resign from the junior warden role, she *pressed* into it. She continued to give her time to overseeing the construction project.

After each day's chemotherapy treatment, she would stop at the construction site and record the day's progress by taking a photo.

This story speaks volumes to me: A young person who will not live much longer, with crazy demands on her time, intentionally gives of her remaining time to God—the one resource she could not replenish. She gives sacrificially of her time. She presses on, *as if she has all the time in the world*.

In the Book of Acts, the author tells us about the conversion of Saul—blinded on the road to Damascus, a personal encounter with Christ, restoration of sight, and—as God does—a new name to go with a new relationship with God: Paul.

Now, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul is describing what this conversion has meant for him. He is a pharisee, a successful businessman, well educated, and he's single. He sounds like the perfect find on e-harmony. But, now, all of that: status, wealth, and privilege are counted, *by him*, as “rubbish”. Paul seems to have the American dream in-hand...and he's throwing it away. Joyfully! What in the world is happening in him?

Encounters with Truth change us.

A couple of weeks ago, I introduced Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. We explored the inward disciplines of prayer, meditation, fasting, and study. Today, I'd like to turn to the 2nd section in the book, where Foster describes the Outward Disciplines... particularly, the Discipline of Simplicity.

Foster notes that, “The Xn Discipline of simplicity is an *inward* reality that results in an *outward* life-style.”

Simplicity is not the way of our American culture. We are accumulators: money, houses, clothes, shoes, titles, zip codes.... Whatever success or security means to you is probably reflected in your lifestyle.

In 2014, I expanded my home from 3,000 sq ft to 3,200 sq ft. In my garage, there was an SUV, an electric car, and a hot yellow sports car. And I lived alone.

The next year, I moved into seminary housing for three years. 420 square feet. Cinderblock walls painted in a peculiar shade of beige. Linoleum tiles for the flooring. One bathroom; one closet. A small kitchen stove and refrigerator. 3 kitchen cupboards. No dishwasher. And, I shared that space with a roommate.

At the end of our second year, I locked up the apartment for the summer. And then I stopped.... reopened the door and stood there looking. Everything...absolutely everything....we needed to live for two years was contained in that space.

I walked away from that moment aware that I had changed.

My inward reality had been reshaped in the process of spiritual formation. And it changed the way I choose to live today.

In Foster's words, **"Simplicity sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep and can be freely shared with others."**

Paul has been set free from the pursuit of status, wealth, and privilege. He has been inwardly changed. And the outward manifestation becomes his ministry. He invests all that he has—and all that he is—to spreading the Gospel of Christ. He will press each of the churches he plants to remember that "the church exists not for its own sake but to bear witness to the grace of God."

Annie Lamott said, "I do not at all understand the Mystery of Grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

In 1993, the Mystery of Grace met Penny Weatherford here--at St. Martin-in-the-fields. Penny was the junior warden whose story I shared earlier. The parish hall

she helped to build, while battling cancer, is the one behind this sanctuary. It was during Penny's term as junior warden that the vestry decided to take a leap of faith: to build a parish hall, start a pre-school, and lay the foundation for future families to plant their spiritual roots here.

When the Stewardship Committee asked me to preach today, I began by asking myself "What is St. Martin's story?" How does this parish live into its mission to be the Heart and Hands of Christ in the world?

So, I went to our Facebook pictures and searched through photos from the past 5 or so years. Because of our mission statement, I was looking for images of our hands. What is the work God is doing through our hands? I downloaded 50 pictures and made them into a video, added a piece of music, hit play...and watched in awe.

I saw gathering, prayer, baptism, study, blessing, art, feeding, people who are now saints, music, ministry, formation, and smiles. I saw people standing on the floors that Penny Weatherford photographed as they were being laid 25 years ago. I saw Penny's fingerprints on sandwiches that would feed homeless, hungry souls. I saw children learning in classrooms where Penny's children learned.

I never met Penny. But I see her everywhere I look.

We stand on a tradition of Holy Giving. Penny and every person who has given sacrificially to St. Martin-in-the Fields have shown us what Holy Giving looks like. We stand on their foundation.

And now, it is your turn to watch the video and ask yourself: what story has God been writing at St. Martin's? What is the story we will tell in 2021? How will our fingerprints show up in the world?