

BOARD MEMBER PREACHES ON PASSIONATE GOSPEL ACTION

Below is a sermon preached by the Rev. Bruce McNab at Christ Church where he is rector. We are both proud and fortunate to have a leader like Bruce serving on our leadership team for Church Army USA. For Additional Sermons by Rev. McNab, go to <http://christchurchaspen.org/sermons.htm>

A Passion for the Gospel.

The Rev. Bruce McNab, Christ Church, Aspen

5th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B. February 5, 2006. (Text: I Corinthians 9:16–23)

As some of you know, I'm a member of the board of the Church Army in the USA. I want to use Church Army to illustrate a point this morning. Its goal and motto is "to reach the least, the last, and the lost with the life-transforming Good News of Jesus Christ." People can't be commissioned in the Church Army unless they're ready to go and call on their friends and family and home church and other churches to solicit donations that will become their pay. These officers are like Paul in today's epistle lesson. They want to make the gospel "free of charge" to the people they're serving.

They have a passion for the Gospel, a passion to communicate the message of Christ "to the least, the last, and the lost." Let me ask you, how do you picture "the least, the last, and the lost"? These are people outside the social mainstream, people who aren't regarded very highly by their neighbors. They're the chronically poor, the addicted, the homeless, and the vagrant in the alley with his wine bottle in a paper bag. They're not the kind of "nice people" we typically encounter in an Episcopal Church, where statistics show that the average church member is a fifty-two year old college-educated woman with some independent income. This contrast makes it all the more exciting to me, because the Church Army is a ministry within our Episcopal Church.

They plant churches among the people they serve. You'd call these churches "non-traditional." Their worship services don't look or sound exactly like what we're doing here this morning. But the Church Army provides "worship that works" for the people they're serving. They're sensitive to what these people need, if they're to be reached. They identify with them. They've learned what Paul

meant when he wrote: To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Keep in your mind that familiar line: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

Church Army officers are passionate about the gospel, excited about the limitless value of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But most of us in our churches don't have such strong feelings about the gospel. In fact, some of us seem mostly indifferent. Caught up in the relativism of our age, we act reluctant to proclaim publicly that people need Jesus Christ, or that they might be better off if they were Christians. The prevailing culture in Europe and even here in the USA says, "Religion is merely a matter of personal taste." On those terms, being a Christian is akin to having a preference for pork over beef, or liking the color blue more than the color brown. There's really nothing better about blue carpet than brown, and nothing inherently superior about pork loin over porterhouse steak. It's just a matter of private preference. People say, "I find that Christianity works for me, but – of course – something else might work for you."

Christianity is not just another item on the spiritual menu! It's not like having the choice of "soup or salad" with our entrée at Outback Steakhouse. God did not send his only Son into the world to die on the cross so that people could have "options." Christ died to set all humanity free. He died that we might have life, now and always. Look back at the collect – the opening prayer that we offered this morning. We prayed "Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us...the liberty of that abundant life which thou hast manifested in thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ." —Christianity is about freedom from bondage. It's about abundant life.

It's interesting to me that many of our people who are indifferent or purely relativistic in matters of faith are dogmatically passionate

about matters of politics and economics. Such people boldly assert and marshal statistics to prove that democracy is superior to other forms of government and free market capitalism is superior to other economic systems. And they're willing to work hard to figure out ways to bring the "blessings" of democratic capitalism to other societies. I don't disagree with them about democracy or capitalism, but I'd love to see them have the same degree of passion for the Good News of Christ that they have for the good news of democracy or the free market system!

We'd have to say Paul was fanatical about Jesus Christ. Paul was probably a young man from a prominent Jewish family. He had money and a good education. He could have had power and influence among his own people. But he turned his back on all that and probably alienated his well-to-do family when he became a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. A self-described "Pharisee of the Pharisees," he dedicated himself to preaching to non-Jews, and he was willing to do whatever it would take to be heard by people who didn't know anything about the Law of Moses. —You and I are in this church this morning because Paul was willing to do whatever it would take to spread the Gospel.

A motivational speaker once said "there are two kinds of people in the world, those who say 'whatever' and those who say 'whatever it takes.'" All of us know people who live their lives with the motto of a petulant adolescent on their lips, the classic response of the teenager who's been told that it's important to make sure she gets the oil changed in her car or who's told that he better not stay out too late because he has a big exam in the morning. The kids say, "Whatever." —Let's play a little game. Let's make up a litany. I'm going to repeat some things that Jesus said, and when I do, I want you to respond with a shrug and a sigh and say, "Whatever." Let's practice. Remember the adolescent shrug and sigh. Say: "Whatever." O.K., here we go.

Jesus said, "You must be born again." —"Whatever."

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest." —"Whatever."

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." —"Whatever."

Jesus said, “There’s more rejoicing over one lost sheep who is found than over ninety-nine who never strayed.”—“Whatever.”

Jesus said, “In as much as you have done something for the least of these, you have done it for me.” —“Whatever.”

How did that feel? Pretty “ho-hum?” Now I want you to change your response from a bored “Whatever” to an excited “Whatever it takes!” Let’s practice that. Give it some energy: “Whatever it takes!”

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Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest.” —“Whatever it takes!”

Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” —“Whatever it takes!”

Jesus said, “There’s more rejoicing over one lost sheep who is found than over ninety-nine who never strayed.” —“Whatever it takes!”

Jesus said, “In as much as you have done something for the least of these, you have done it for me.” —“Whatever it takes!”

The challenge for every Church is to have the passion of Paul, to be willing to do whatever it takes to communicate the Good News of Christ to a world that needs the Gospel at least as much as it needs democracy and free market enterprise.

I’ve talked a lot about Church Army this morning. You might even think I’m about to try to raise some money! I’m grateful for the Church Army and thankful to be associated with it, because it gives the rest of us in our church a living example of what can be accomplished when people have a passion for the Gospel. We live in a nation and in a community and in an age when if we aren’t willing to do whatever it takes to communicate the Good News, we won’t make much of an impression on the world around us. But, if we’re prepared to become “all things to all people,” to do whatever it takes, there’s no limit to what –by God’s grace– we can accomplish.

Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ