

“Hannah’s Story...Our Story”
3rd Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 4
June 1, 2008

Texts: Psalm 31 / Deuteronomy 11:18-28 / Romans 3:21-28 / Matthew 7:21-27

Deuteronomy 11:18-28

18 “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. **19 You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.** **20** You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, **21** that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. **22** For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, **23** then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves. **24** Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours. Your territory shall be from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea. **25** No one shall be able to stand against you. The LORD your God will lay the fear of you and the dread of you on all the land that you shall tread, as he promised you.

26 “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: **27** the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, **28** and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

Many of you know that this is the first Sunday that the Snyder family has come to church without our newest member of the family, Hannah Ferguson. Last Wednesday she flew home to Scotland to spend the summer with her biological family (her eastern family) and then begin her college education at the University of Glasgow. We miss her...many in this congregation miss her, but her impact on us will continue to be felt for many months to come.

Although much of what I will say today is about our experience with Hannah, I want you to know that I believe this says more about the people of St. John’s than it does Hannah. There is no doubt that Hannah was an exceptional young lady, but I believe that St. John’s also shone brightly in this relationship.

Johnny Cash has a song that says,

Come hear me good brothers come here one and all
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall
You're shinin' your light yes and shine so you should
You're so heavenly minded and you're no earthly good

Sometimes we can become so focused on heavenly perfection, so focused on the protection of the faith, so focused on our own sanctification, that we forget about those who are struggling with the basics of the faith and those who have never been given a winsome picture of Jesus Christ. I can thankfully say that, in this instance with Hannah, the people of God were not so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. In fact, the Youth Group of St. John's especially was very earthly good while being heavenly minded. The Youth Group has showed us the way in bringing others to Christ. As someone has said, "People don't care how much you know, but how much you care."

Our passage from the OT is from Deuteronomy and speaks of the constant, diligent training of children and youth. Verses 18 and 19 say,

18 "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. **19** You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

What I want to say today is that St. John's has a gift for this...a gift for holding fast to God's Word and training up children and adults in God's way. But, it is a gift that I believe we have failed to fully recognize and utilize for the spreading of the Kingdom of God.

Hannah came to us some five months ago. Within two weeks of her arrival she had already stolen the Snyder family's heart. So, it came as a great shock when Hannah informed us, after being here only a few weeks, that she was an atheist. She said that she greatly respected our beliefs, but that she had thought this through and she was a confirmed atheist. She did not feel comfortable receiving the Blessed Sacrament and was not sure that she wanted to continue to worship with us on Sundays. Beth and I were dumbfounded. We had

been very clear before she arrived that we were a clergy family and that any exchange student coming to us must realize this.

After some discussion, Beth and I convinced Hannah that, as part of her cultural experience, she would need to continue to come to Sunday worship, but that she should not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. We asked her if she would continue to come to the altar rail with the family, and fold her arms over her chest so that she could receive a blessing from the priest each Sunday. She agreed with our arrangement. Beth and I, and Sarah and Rachel, came to see this as a season of planting seeds of faith in Hannah's life...but, we really had little expectation of seeing these seeds bloom and grow while she was here.

Within a few weeks she was telling us that worship at St. John's was not at all like her church experience in Scotland. Whereas the worship in Scotland was, in her estimation, boring and lifeless, she said that she felt vitality, joy, and love during the worship at St. John's. At the encouragement of Rob, our youth minister, and some of the youth, Hannah started regularly attending the Youth Group on Sunday evenings. She grew to love these times of release, discussion, and encouragement among her peers on Sunday evenings...and I know that the youth and youth leaders grew to love her.

I am still learning lessons from this time with Hannah. But, possibly the most profound lesson I have learned is that we Christians often isolate ourselves from unbelievers. We tend to, as we grow in the faith, to spend more and more time with good Christians, and less and less time with those who are unbelievers. While this may be good for our own training and deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ, we all need to keep in contact, somehow, with a group that is not Christian. This could be a secular book study, a group of soccer or baseball parents, the place where you exercise, or a club, or some other organization that is not expressly Christian. And we need to just be a positive influence and love the people of that group and wait for an opening to invite them to church or a bible study. And, then, let the love of St. John's overflow them.

Because, I am convinced that it was the weekly hearing of God's Word, the love of the students in the Youth Group and Rob and Anna, as well as the love of the people of St.

John's that made such an impact on Hannah. Week in and week out she had many people praying for her, interceding on her behalf, all the while she was stewing in the Word of God and surrounded by those worshipping God in Spirit and Truth.

One of the songs we sing often at Communion and at Cursillo says, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." You showed Hannah that sort of love. I have heard several people at St. John's say about spreading the Gospel, "Well, I'm just not an evangelist," or "I'm not comfortable talking to folks about Jesus." All I can say is, that is not true. We are able to love folks into the Kingdom...we have proved it with Hannah Ferguson and with her family. In fact, we are really good at it. But, they need to be invited here. You need to invite your family, friends, neighbors, co-workers to St. John's. It is as simple as that.

However, we cannot just wait for folks to come through those doors. What Hannah has taught me is that the folks who don't know Jesus need to be in church, in Youth Group, or in Bible studies and accountability groups for a time. Much of this we have learned in the Lenten study, "Just Walk Across the Room." It does not happen over night, but happens through concentrated time with the Body.

In early April, Hannah's parents, Steve and Allie Ferguson, came to visit. They spent two wonderful weeks in downtown Charleston (in a home provided by a parishioner), and attended St. John's both Sundays that they were here. They both loved St. John's. They loved the worship, they loved the music, they loved the spirit, and most importantly, they loved the people...you. The Miller family invited them over to Sunday dinner and Beth and I took them to the Charleston Symphony Orchestra Gospel Choir concert at Holy Spirit Catholic Church. They met many of the people of St. John's and were just taken with you. On their return flight to Scotland, Hannah's mother, Allie, said that she and Steve talked incessantly about their own faith and the people of St. John's. They were taken with us and the joyful spirit found here...just as we were taken with them!

Then, just a few weeks ago, Hannah started asking a flood of questions about God and faith. She started reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, and more questions were being answered. Still she balked, because she said that she had too many questions that needed answering. Finally, last Sunday she came to a crisis of faith. She and Beth spent a great deal

of time in prayer and Beth asked her if she wanted to receive Christ into her heart. She said “No,” because she still had too many unanswered questions, but she wanted to know how to make this decision. So Beth told her how to say the sinners’ prayer, and how to accept Christ into heart, if she came to a place and time where she would feel comfortable doing that. And, then we went about saying our goodbyes and getting Hannah packed to return home. But, the Lord was not through with her or us, yet.

On Monday, Memorial Day, the Snyder family went to Camp St. Christopher for the clergy day celebration sponsored by Bishop Mark Lawrence and his wife, Allison. We had a great day reconnecting with brothers and sisters in full-time ministry, laughing and encouraging one another.

At some point in the day, Hannah took a walk alone on the beach. There in the midst of God’s creation, with the waves lapping onto the beach, and the breeze blowing in from the ocean, Hannah sat in the sand...and took a leap of faith, and asked Jesus into her heart...all by herself. Later that day she had the opportunity to tell Beth about her decision and we all rejoiced in her “leap of faith.”

And so, on Tuesday night, with just a small group of friends and family, we all sat around a table at the rectory and participated with Hannah in her “first communion.” For the first time in her life Hannah understood what the Body and Blood of Christ truly were. For the first time in her life, she knew what it was to be truly part of one family of believers, The Body of Christ. Alleluia!

Do not be ashamed of the Gospel. We have to realize that we truly do have Good News for the world! Hannah came to understand that. There is salvation, there is peace, through Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross. Do you believe that? Then let us shout it from the rooftops! Let us fling open the doors to all...let us invite all...let us love all.

18 “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. **19** You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Amen.

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