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QUIET LIVES-STRONG PILLARS

On Wednesday, after church, I began to think about what it means to be a pillar of the church. Who truly supports the church and keeps her alive in her essence? The answer, of course, is the almighty and merciful Lord God. The Church is his and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. But who is it in the realm of our labors and in the sphere of common daily life that preserve the essence of the parish? It is those whom we might call simple churchmen.

It is those churchmen who are simply here, unpretentious, undemanding, who come to worship God, say their prayers, learn their faith, and be a part of the "blessed company of all faithful people."

Their lives speak for themselves. Whatever they may be outside of church, they are most always in church. They belong here because their heart draws them here. They come because they would be nowhere else.

And the reason they come is because they draw close to God. It is not the clergy, or music, or mere habit that draws them. It is the treasure of their heart.

Jesus taught us that where our treasure is there our heart shall be also. And with the abundant opportunities that we have in our culture the treasures of the heart may be many. But the Lord said that there is really only one treasure, just as he told Martha of Bethany, when she was annoyed at Mary's apparent unconcern for the practical matters of entertaining a guest. Mary had chosen the one needful thing - to sit at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10: 38-42).

Jesus taught us not to lay up treasure on earth where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves steal. Only eternal riches are worthy of something as wonderful and powerful as the heart. Eternal riches do not grow old or fade away. They cannot be stolen. Eternal things abide and fill the heart continually. It is the eternal matters of the heart which they seek who live quiet lives and are the true pillars of the church.

Most often these simple churchmen have suffered adversity in their lives. Either they or their family have undergone something difficult. And so they tend to be of the graying variety, older and wiser, (although being grayer and older does not prevent some from being presumptuous and foolish). These simple churchmen know that in God

their difficulty is somehow overcome. The answer will not be found finally in this world.

But it is not just those who have suffered. All of us have felt hardship or heartache to a degree. Those of us who have not will do so before our life's end.

Those who live quiet and strong and who seek God as the treasure of their heart have realized that they have no abiding place on this earth. They are sojourners looking to the place where they belong and which they long for. Each time they come to church they have in mind what is articulated in this prayer:

"O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength. By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God."

Simply to be here is the return and the rest. It is the stillness of the church, as in Elliott's "still point of the turning world," which draws these simple churchmen. It is through the quietness, in the midst of stillness, that the peace of God flows into the heart, like the afternoon sun, warm and gentle, softly pouring into the church. To be here simply, honestly, openly, is to enter the gate that leads to that greater light on that other shore.

Why here? Why this particular place? Because this place is undisturbed by other concerns. It is set aside for this very thing. No doubt, the Spirit moves where he will. He is in every operation of life, accomplishing his will most effectually. But here in church the motion of the world is given rest, and the sound of the world is made quiet, and the heart is alone to set its desire on the one need that will satisfy the longing.

And so it is not the tireless worker, the innovative thinker, or the generous giver that really supports the church. While we could not get along without these, what they do is not finally the essence of what we do and who we are. It is those who come simply to be here "in returning and rest" who gather up all the efforts of our works and purge them by being still in the presence of Jesus.

That is finally what we all need. Our strength is to "sit still" as Isaiah put it and blessed Fr. Ralston used to remind us (Isaiah 30:7 KJV). All else is peripheral. This alone is substantial. By sitting still we are taken up into the communion of that City where God awaits us. For, in the words of Dante, "everything the will has ever sought is gathered there, and there is every quest made perfect which apart from it falls short" (Paradiso, Canto XXXIII, 130). The truth is that after all is said and done, the human heart seeks only this one thing, a communion, a union with all that love needs and desires and wants. Nothing is left out. This is why the author of Revelation says that there will be a new heaven and a new earth (21:1). It shall not be our mere opinions or vain imaginations that we shall inherit, but the Kingdom that shall have no end. The heavenly Jerusalem is that place where we shall find all our faith and hope – and every inkling of love – made sure, eternal, perfect.

You may think that I have gone too far with this reflection on those

who come simply to church. But I do not think so. The partaking of eternal things is what Plato, and later one of his greatest students St. Augustine, called participation. Participation such as this is an activity, a reality of spirit, that holds us steady, supporting us like strong pillars, while we deal with "the devices and desires of our own hearts."

We should thank God for those who are simply here. They may seem to be the least in the kingdom of heaven, they may seem to be insignificant members of the Body of Christ, but they are much more. The last shall be first. And the less honorable shall reign on high. They already possess a nobility of spirit and aura of deep wisdom which their friends in heaven always see, but which we who mind earthly things, are only beginning to see.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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