

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



February 2012

A Message from the Rector:

Note: Wawa is the name of a “convenience” store chain commonly found throughout the Philadelphia region, which includes southern New Jersey.

Dear Friends, It happened again! On a recent shopping excursion to the local Wawa to replenish the milk supply, a customer leaving the store smiled and held the door open for me. When I was leaving, I held the door for someone on their way in, and they turned and said, “Thank you.” It nearly always happens that way. It’s not contrived or premeditated. There is nothing ostentatious. It is just a natural action that really doesn’t bear much thinking about, but, when I do, I sometimes think of it as the “Wawa culture”! Perhaps this doesn’t happen to you. You might be thinking, “It’s because you’re a priest.” Well, perhaps sometimes. But I often go to the store dressed like any other scruffy old white guy, and the same thing happens! No, it is the Wawa culture! If you stop to think about it, it’s the way many of us were brought up to be. Throughout my childhood my mother never missed an opportunity to tell a story on me from the time when I was two. Apparently we were about to enter the door of a department store, and I was blocking the way of a lady trying to leave. My mother said, “Marty, what do you say to the lady?” I said, “Get out of my way!” As the story was told and re-told it gained the familiarity of a church ritual. It was clear that the moment was embarrassing and unacceptable! Funny? Yes, but only because the child in question was two years old!

Looking out for each other goes beyond simple acts of politeness. It is the way most of us want to live with our families, friends and neighbors. We hadn’t been living in the rectory on Second Street for more than two or three days when one of the young men who lived next door came knocking just to warn us that there had been an attempted burglary on the street earlier in the week, and we should be on the alert. Neighbors watch out for neighbors. As our kids grew, we knew we were blessed to live on one of those streets that retained that “village” quality of life where all the adults look out for all the children. The way my kids tell it to me now is that they couldn’t do anything too outrageous because the eyes of the mothers, dads, grannies, and aunts always had them under surveillance.

Looking out for each other! Watching each others’ back! It’s all part of the American way of life, isn’t it? Barn raisings and farmers joining together to bring in each others’ harvests are part of the lore of rural America. I know it’s more than fable, because I had various relatives who were farmers, and this is what they did. In the early 1800’s about the time that St Paul’s Church was founded, a young French aristocrat visited the new United States of America to see for himself how democracy worked. Alexis de Tocqueville was himself a liberal thinker, but many of his class doubted the ability of ordinary people to

govern themselves. It was common to think that without strong rulers a community would degenerate to a state of self-serving anarchy. Every man for himself! What de Tocqueville was able to report was something quite different. It was the America of barn-raising and mutual cooperation which came from the heart - almost instinctively. There were no powerful elites and armies bullying and compelling people to pull together and look out for each other. They just did it. Free men and women just seem to cooperate with each other of their own free will. We elect a government to carry out our common will.

Freedom of the individual to live without coercion is certainly part of who we are, but I have heard it said that it is all about rugged individualism. The kind of individualism that says, "God helps those who help themselves." It is argued that the nation was built by men who were primarily concerned with wealth creation - their own mostly. That is supposed to be the true American spirit. The twentieth century novelist Ayn Rand portrayed such individualism in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Reading her stories back in college days left me unimpressed. Her ego-centric characters made me think of the old song, "What ever Lola wants, Lola gets." I was surprised to hear on a Public Radio discussion that her works have experienced something of a revival. Apparently, some think she demonstrates true American spirit. I always figured that because she was from Russia and experienced the Bolshevik Revolution she just over-reacted. In our public debate we seem to be at a fork in the road. Are we about every man for himself or are we a people who look out for each other?

Our life together - the community life of any people - is organized to serve the common good. That is to say, we are organized so everybody benefits. This is not a strange notion to Christians. The Word of God by which we live is from beginning to end directing us to see not just God and me all by ourselves, but God, me, and everybody else. Jesus reminds us of the two great Commandments at the heart of God's Covenant when he says, '***The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.***' (Mark 12:29-31) In no way is this summary of the Law a one time occurrence in the Bible. From the beginning it seems that God wants us to share our life. "***Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'***" (Genesis 2:18) So saying, God set to work creating more life and eventually the woman, so that the man could say, "***This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...***" (Genesis 2:23) The two were to live together as one. From the beginning there is community! From time to time great men and women were called upon to lead - Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, to name a few - but they served the whole People of God. The bulk of the Covenant which God gave through Moses is about how we deal with each other.

When prophetic voices speak, their warnings as often as not draw attention to failures in justice and mercy within the community. In the early Christian centuries some, sickened by the corruption of the urban society of the day, sought solitude in the wilderness. Anthony of Egypt gave away his inheritance and moved into the desert in direct response to hearing the word of Jesus to sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow. His solitude did not last long, however. Others followed him for his advice and counsel. Soon monks (which means the solitary ones) were living in community! It seems that we are meant to be together - like it or not.

Ash Wednesday is coming soon. It marks the beginning of Lent, but has the special character of being a day of repentance for sin. In theology sin means estrangement from God - a broken relationship. Imagine not being able to face your father or some other

person who loves you dearly. Our shame arises from things we have done, or that we should have done and did not. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the loving God does not desire our banishment or shame, but asks only that we return to him and seek his forgiveness. The wonderful story that Jesus told of a father's amazing love for his two sons - one a wastrel and the other hardworking, but bitter (**see Luke 15:11-32**) - is a taste of what God is like. Some of the things that shame us will, of course, be things that we have done, said, or thought. Rightly so. But we are also shamed and damaged by things in which we share as part of our community. You can call it corporate guilt, if you like. Our world is not fair or just. The abundance of creation is shared in a shockingly lopsided manner, a few having more than they need and many are without bare essentials. The reality of outrageous inequality shuffles by me every day. You can say, "Nothing I have done has caused this." or "People make their own troubles." Deep down every believing Christian must know that is a bad attitude. The Lord Jesus always had compassion. He proclaimed by word and deed the coming reign of God when justice, mercy, and peace would be fueled by the power of God's Love and would fall on all alike. Much of what we own up to on Ash Wednesday and face up to through the rest of Lent is our own complicity in what is so wrong in the world.

No confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness would be complete without some honest commitment to follow Jesus better. That means, inevitably, recognizing that none of us is here for himself (or herself) alone. We are bound together. We are bound with people we like and respect and with people we do not. More than bound, we are asked to care about them. It sounds tough, maybe doomed to failure already! Our hope and glory is that in the end it is the loving Father whom we know through the stories Jesus told and whom we see in his face that makes all well.

Start out simply on the Gospel path. Think and do small acts of kindness and gratitude (like we do at the Wawa) and then project those actions onto the larger stage of our life together as family, community, and nation. How would that look? Pretty good, I think.

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