

**A SERMON PREACHED BY MICHAEL HANLEY
AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH, ROSEVILLE, MN ON SUNDAY October 13th, 2002**

Kingdom Living

I have enjoyed watching the Minnesota Twins play baseball these last few weeks. There is something quite amazing about the fact that even in the bottom of the 9th inning with two outs and two strikes on the batter, with one swing of the bat the fortunes of both teams can change!

But, watching on TV is a little like peeking through a knothole in the centerfield fence. It is easy to feel not quite in the game when not in the ballpark. In our lives we are often more spectator than participant or player, often we only hear a part of the Gospel message.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ which has been preached throughout the ages is a two edged sword. On the one hand the gospel is full of the love, grace and compassion of a loving God. On the other hand we learn again and again that there are consequences to being a follower of the crucified one.

Throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament we continually hear of God's love and compassion for the people of the earth. The lessons today are no exception. In the first reading from Isaiah we here that God is "a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat." On this mountain, we learn that Israel will receive a feast of rich food from the hands of Almighty God. In Psalm 23 we discover a God who revives our souls and who guides us along right pathways. The Psalmist continues by reminding us that we are comforted by God and we are given a rich banquet table at which to feast.

The Apostle Paul writes to the people gathered in Philippi and exhorts them to rejoice in the Lord always for the Lord is near. He tells them not to worry about anything. The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. The Gospel lesson from Matthew's 22nd chapter imagines the kingdom of God to be like a wedding banquet to which all are invited. With these and many other wonderful words we are reminded that we live in the hands of a good and loving God who yearns to give us all we need and more.

Along side these words and images of the love of God; there is a call to live a righteous life in the name of Jesus Christ. In Isaiah we hear this call as an echo as he talks about the fortified city in ruin and the palace of aliens being a city no more. Those who do not choose to live in the kingdom live outside it and that place is a place of pain and suffering without redemption. The echo is stronger in the words of the Psalmist, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death; I shall fear no evil." Yet evil exists and without the Lord the valley is a cold and lonely place without comfort or hope. The echo takes voice in the words of Paul, "finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." With these words Paul makes it clear that there is a right and a good way of life and there is a way which is wrong. Paul goes on to remind the Christians of his day that he has known both plenty and hunger and in all circumstances he has learned the secret of living well. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

In the Gospel we hear the voice of God's claim on our lives shouted full strength. Jesus claims that life in the kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet to which we all have to respond. Those with excuses will be lost and even those who do answer the call must wear the appropriate robe or they also will be lost.

Throughout the 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel the scribes and elders of the people want to know by what authority Jesus does the teaching and preaching he does. Jesus, however, changes the question. Jesus does not want to talk about his authority; he wants to talk about life in the Kingdom. Jesus tells the scribes and elders that they are hypocrites. And he tells three parables of the kingdom. The parable of the two sons, the parable of the vineyard and today's parable of the wedding feast. They are all about life in

the kingdom of God and they make the same point. They all ask, "will you live in the kingdom of God or do you chose to live outside the kingdom?"

In my 20 years as a priest I have gotten pretty good at giving the "God loves you" sermon. All of you have heard it and to some degree you know of God's love and you live in that love. To some degree, however, we all also do not trust that love and we chose to live outside of the love of God living on our own resources. The question I want to ask you today is this, How would you like to respond to the wonderful grace and love of God? How will you respond? What will you give back to God in exchange for the gifts you have been given?

On this Consecration Sunday we are talking about your own individual financial pledge to the work of God through St. Christopher's and I do want to take that seriously. I do want you to consider well what amount of money you will contribute to this institution. Without your support nothing we now do can continue. Without your support no new thing can begin. This year we will be challenged more than even because I do not intend to support another deficit budget. It is time we lived with what God gives us.

Without your financial dollars this place folds up and whatever God wants the Episcopal Church to do in this part of the world will not happen. It is as simple as that. However, I do not want to spend a lot of time on your individual commitment to this specific church. I want to talk on the level of the community. I want to ask this question, How are we, the members of St. Christopher's, living in the kingdom of God? How are we like the son who tells his father he will no go into the vineyard to work but later repents and does in fact work in the vineyard? How are we like the new tenants to whom the vineyard has been given who in fact give to the owner of the vineyard the fruit of the vineyard? How are we like the people in the street who were invited to the wedding banquet and no only showed up but showed up wearing the right wedding garment?

Any church is about many things but for simplicity's sake let me group the work of the church into four categories, Christian education, worship, outreach, and fellowship. How is St. Christopher's living in the kingdom of God in these four areas? And how are we failing to do so?

What are we doing in Christian education? Our education program for the smallest members of the community is going well. We are teaching the Montessori based Godly play curriculum for the third year. We have great staff support and we have good teachers. Our education program for the middle years has experienced a shift in focus this year. Sandy Wittman has almost single handedly rewritten the curriculum for these middle grades and they are using the godly play concept for the first year. The teachers for these grades are doing a difficult job well. The Sunday morning education program for the older JR and SR high youth is in its third year and with the help of Sandy Wittman and Rodney Anderson these programs are going well, However they are housed in poor quality church space. We need better facilities for these kids. Our Christian education program for adults is poor at best. From time to time we offer a good teaching program but it is not consistent and it does not exist on Sunday mornings. This is a terrible thing. We need to offer good high quality educational experiences of adults and we do not.

What are we doing in worship? The music program of the parish has grown significantly under the guidance of Jacob Manier. Jacob works very hard to make the music ministries of the parish top notch and he has done an excellent job. Music is a real strength here at St. Christopher's. We have made preaching a priority and Gayle, Paul, Ken, David and I have worked hard to provide you with good and thoughtful reflections on the scriptures. We have increased the number of people taking an active role in the ministries of Sunday mornings and we have asked those so involved to make a commitment to active participation in these ministries in all the parts of their lives. We offer a midweek Eucharist on Wednesday mornings and we are continuing to add new opportunities to gather for prayer and worship all the time. We have talked about redesigning the worship space for a new generation of worshippers but we need to do it.

What are we doing in Outreach? We continue to offer many opportunities to get involved with ministries to those less fortunate than ourselves. We are involved in habitat of humanity, meals of wheels, paint-a-thon and many other community projects. We help refugees resettle. We have a food pantry and assist those who come to our doors seeking assistance. We have done all these things for a long time, but we need to continue to look for new ways to serve the rapidly changing world. Doing only what we have always done is simply not good enough.

What are we doing in fellowship? We continue to offer a lot of fellowship opportunities. Some through the silent auction, some in long standing fellowship groups like the over 55 group and some in newer ventures such as fun-for-8. We welcome newcomers to this church well and we try to make a place for them at the table. We do not always succeed. At times we are self-centered and at times we fail to make way for others. Coffee hour at times becomes just a place to say hello to friends and fails to be a place to welcome those who come into our midst. We have not done well of late in developing new groups for families and for those who are younger in our parish.

I could say much more about these ministries and I could name a number of other people who have contribute to the work of God in this place. I do not, however, have the time to do so. I need today to do one more thing. I need to tell you a hard truth. It is my firm belief that we are more complacent than we are mission minded. We are mostly resting on yesterday's deeds. We spend a lot of time being self-centered and not other centered. I think we spend a lot of time living just outside of the kingdom of God and I think I know a lot of the reasons for doing so. We are comfortable. We like what the church gives us and we like being taken care of. We do not like being challenged mostly because the rest of our lives are so challenging. We want the church to comfort us; we do not want it to challenge us. But the reality is God is making a demand on your life. God wants you as a worker in the vineyard not as one who sits in a lounge chair and watches others do the work. God, I am convinced has a ministry for you and God has a ministry for this parish.

I want to live in the kingdom of God and I am tired of living just outside the fence. So, here is what I am going to do. First, I am going to the vestry meeting on October 21st and I am going to ask them for permission to tear down the wall in the basement which is preventing us from doing a better job of ministry with our youth. If they give me the go ahead I am going to bring my sledgehammer to the church and start knocking down the wall myself. Second I am calling an all parish town meeting for Sunday November 17th to discuss the mission of this parish. At that time I will lay out my concerns about the parish community and begin a process of listening for the voice of Gods call in the life of this community. Third, I am going to begin offering an adult education program one Sunday a month in the parish hall. On those days the coffee hour group will be in the new narthex. Finally, while I will continue to preach the love of God I intend to preach God's demand on our lives as well.

The other day I watched the Twins celebrate in their locker room after winning the five game series against the Oakland A's. The scene was one of wild abandon as cheap champagne was opened and sprayed all over the place. They were jumping up and down. They were shouting at the top of their lungs. The smiles on their faces held pure joy. If the kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet then every week our faces should be as joyful and our bodies should be drenched in cheap champagne.

I pray this day that by your generous pledge to the work of God through St. Christopher's and by your commitment to working in the kingdom, you will walk with me into God's kingdom and join the celebration. Amen.

**A SERMON PREACHED BY MICHAEL HANLEY
AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH, ROSEVILLE, MN
ON SUNDAY NOVEMBER 4th, 2001**

Dancing at the Pink Barn

At thirteen I enrolled in the Pink Barn Dance Studio. Mom was insistent that I learn to dance. The studio was in a pink barn. It was in Tulsa, Oklahoma just a few miles down the road from our home. It was a converted cow barn. Painted pink and provided with all of the latest equipment it stood beside the road and called out to all those who would listen, come and learn to dance. Inside there was an oak floor, a good music system and instructors who were ready to teach us the standard steps to the fox trot and the waltz. In the distant future there was also the promise of the funky chicken.

The first afternoon of class I dressed in good slacks, a sports shirt and tie. As I looked around the dance floor I saw many other 13-year-olds similarly attired in close to their Sunday best. The girls were especially interesting. There were thin ones and thick one. Ones with long hair and short hair turned up at the ends. To my thirteen year old eye some were beautiful and others plain or perhaps even ugly. We stood looking at each other making notes and wondering what would happen in the next few minutes.

We began with the fox trot. The instructors lined us up, boy, girl, boy, girl. They told us to put our left hands together and to put our right hands on the waist of our partner. For the first time in my life I touched the waist of a girl. I was amazed at what such a simple act could do to my young brain! The lesson was a blur as I tried to make my feet move to the music in the correct step-slide, step-slide motions. Always aware of the proximity of the other, she was my partner in the dance.

That was my introduction to dancing and to girls and to life itself. From that moment on I knew I wanted more. More of touching, more of being touched. I wanted to dance again with another in my arms. It was my first awareness of knowing both my separateness as a human being from other human beings and my need to be in relationship with others.

I need to belong. I need to feel a part of something that includes me but also supercedes me. A part of a larger whole. Not just me, but me and the other at my side. I seek relationships. I wear a Yankee or diamondback cap to express my solidarity with a larger group. I am anxious with this talk of losing the Minnesota Twins. I am proud of calling my self a Minnesotan, an American, an Episcopalian, a father, a husband, a preacher, a Christian, a lover of books and golf and a hundred other groups I pledge allegiance too.

I want to join up. When I do I am not alone and the darkness is dispelled and loneliness subsides for a while. I can forget that I am ultimately only I. I don't have to think about how I will die and will be no more. I don't have to acknowledge that I am alone in this body. It feels good to be a part of something and not just a single entity.

Perhaps, I sometimes think, if I become famous I can do away with being lonely. If I find a cure for the common cold, write the great American novel or am elected president, I will never again be alone. My own fame will be my shield. When I sit in a booth in a restaurant the couple in the booth next to me will continue to stare over, trying to figure out who I am. They know they have seen me before. On a book jacket. A picture in a medical journal or on the television screen. I will be connected with them even if we never speak.

This human desire to belong is strong in us. It attracts us like a moth to the flame. In its heat we do harm to each other, smothering the other in our need. We hold on so tightly to another that they cannot become their own person. We attack another race or culture so as to strengthen the bonds of our own group. We set the standards for inclusion in our community in such a way as to exclude specific persons we find objectionable. The heat of our desire burns and destroys the landscape around us and we are left in the desolation, the ravages of the fire can be seen for miles.

But even our strongest ties are only for a time. Even the strongest bonds are limited. The girl moves on to another partner in the dance. We move and pledge allegiance to another team in another town. We are famous for our fifteen minutes and step back into the mass of those who are not recognized at the diner. We eat alone for a time until the next time the bus pulls up and we get on board for another magical mystery tour.

There is, however, one to whom we always belong. We always belong to God. God spends every afternoon at the pink barn. God spends every evening at the ballpark. God yearns to dance with us, to hold us tight and to move in the steps with us. God wants to slap our backs and to yell at the top of God's lungs when the home team scores. God lives for intimacy with us. God sits at the side of the dance floor hoping we will invite God to dance. God wants us to feel God's hand on our waist and the feel of God's waist in our own hand. God wants to dance with us.

Much of the time we stand on the dance floor but we do not dance. We are unsure of the steps. We feel awkward. We feel our feet are made of lead. We cannot sense the beat of the music. We are shy and self-conscious. While others dance around us we are continually jostled around, experiencing the pain of a jab in the ribs or the crush of a foot on our own foot.

This morning the psalmist suggests we sing a new song to the Lord. He asks us to rejoice in God and praise God's name in the dance. The psalmist knows of God's desire for us. The psalmist is so sure of God's interest in us that he uses a military image of strength and power and destruction to let us experience the energy of God's passion for us. God will put a two-edged sword in our hand so that those who would defeat us will be unable to stand against us. God's sword is a sword of justice that will be used to bring about God's coming reign of justice and love. Described in the book of Revelation this is a time when the lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd, and will guide us to springs of the water of life. This is the dance Jesus describes to his disciples as they sit at his side on the mountain.

Congratulations, Jesus says to his friends, when you are humble in spirit you are dancing with God. When you can grieve, you are slow dancing with God. When you are gentle, you are in step with the music of the universe. When you ache with hunger and thirst for justice you look beautiful in the waltz. When you know mercy, you know the feel of God's arm around you in the dance. When your heart is in tune with God's heart, you move with your partner as one. When you work for peace you are jitterbugging with God. Even if you are scorned for the sake of justice you will not stumble. Don't let anyone get you to believe you are not beautiful in the sight of God. There is no need to sit on the sidelines and wait to be asked to dance. The music is on, so dance.

This morning in baptism, we invite Mathias to this dance we share with God. It is a dance of love and intimacy. It is a dance of wonder and joy. It is a dance of commitment and passion. The Pink Barn of this world is all around us. It holds the best equipment, a solid earthen floor, a great sound system, and instructors who can teach us the standard, as well as the latest steps. Around the room are all of the people of the world. In all shapes, sizes, colors and patterns they stand ready to dance. God waits to dance with us. The Barn door is open, come, and lets dance.

**SERMON PREACHED BY MICHAEL HANLEY
AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH, ROSEVILLE, MN
ON SUNDAY NOVEMBER 25th, 2001**

Marked as Christ's Own Forever

I was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma and that fact has made a great difference in my life. My father took a job with American Airlines during the depression. He wanted to play professional baseball for the Cleveland Indians, but instead he took a job that marked him for life. He had to work during his teams practice time and that ended his dream of baseball glory. After a while he was transferred to New York from his native Cleveland and met the girl of his dreams. They married and began life together. At one point dad told his boss the people in Tulsa were not doing a good job and his boss told dad to go and fix the situation. Mom was promised the move from cultured New York to backwater Tulsa would be temporary. It turned out to be a life sentence and she was marked forever.

At ten years of age I began to understand how others marked me. I went back to New York for a visit to my cousins. When we met at the airport my cousin Jim, from cultured New York, took one look at me and asked where my guns were. He expected to see someone wearing a ten-gallon hat, boots and a gun belt. He expected me to have stories of cowboys and Indians. I was marked by the simple fact of having been born and raised in Oklahoma. This summer this fact came home again when Marla and I stayed in a Basque farmhouse in rural Spain. The owner asked where we came from. When Marla indicated Oklahoma the woman said she knew about Oklahoma and began to sing the Rogers and Hammerstein song of that title. She knew of us by that musical! We were surly marked by this association.

Harry Potter is not the only one who has been marked for life. Life marks us. We are marked by the decisions we make and the decisions that are made by others but which effect us. We are marked as a person from St. Paul as opposed to Minneapolis and the shaping of opinions begin. We are known as Minnesotian's and others think of ice fishing, professional wrestling and ten thousand lakes, not to mention extreme weather.

We are marked as citizens of this nation, and seen as either good or evil by those who are effected by our power and politics. We are marked by the events that have characterized this nation. Names like Washington, Linlcon, Eisenhower, Kennedy and King say something about who we are at our best. Events such as the revolutionary war, the struggle over slavery, the Second World War and the civil rights movement give us an idea of how we act under pressure. Days such as December 6th and September 11th shape our lives for years.

The stories of our personal lives denote the marks that have shaped us into the people we have become. Whenever we meet a new person for the first time we begin to tell our stories and in the telling we shape a life. Places we have lived, people we have known, actions we have taken all play a part in our self-definition. What is true for individuals is also true for communities of persons. We are marked by the events that make up our corporate identity. St. Christopher's is marked by fifty years of history in Roseville, Minnesota. Sit down sometime with one of our charter members and ask them to tell you the stories of the early days and you will encounter the stories that have shaped this community.

Stories of Vince Anderson and the old school house. The building of the first church on this land. Stories of Gary Pielmayer and the building of this church. Stories of Henry Hoover and the growth of this community through the late sixties and seventies and into the eighties. All of these stories mark us and continue to help us define who we are as a community and who we are being called to become.

This morning we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the final Sunday of the church year. December 2nd marks the beginning of another liturgical year with the beginning of Advent. This Sunday we listen to stories of the faith, stories that have marked the faith community and help to define who we are even in this new day and age.

We hear in Jeremiah of God's concern that leaders in the community care for the people. God's judgement against those who scatter and destroy the people is also noted. We hear also, a hint of God's plan to raise up a righteous branch from David's line. In the psalm we are reminded of God's love for us. We feel the strength of God's love around us. In Colossians we listen to an early Christological hymn reminding us that God in Christ Jesus has rescued us from evil. In the Gospel we experience the passion of Jesus in the way which reaffirms God's continued care for us. These stories let us know that we are in the hands of a loving God. We have a God who cares deeply for us and is committed to being with us in good times and in bad. We have a God who has made a choice for our good fortune.

In the baptismal service there is a point, just after baptizing the individual, where the priest takes holy oil and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized. These words are said, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.

With these words we are marked as Christians. While the oil is invisible the mark should not be. So, how are we shaped by our Baptism? How does it effect our daily lives? Are we different people because of our Baptism into Christ? Do you feel the mark on your forehead? Is the mark noticeable to others? And how about this community, are there specific ways in which we are seen to be marked by our faith?

Scars, we are told by J.K. Rowling, in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, can be useful. As we close out another year in the church, and look toward the beginning of another perhaps it is time to take a fresh look at the scars of our lives that have marked us. Do they remind us of the struggle of good against evil? Do they give us strength to handle the challenges that we encounter as we live out our lives? Do they remind us of who's we are and the demands that are placed on us by our decision to remain in this community? Does our baptism lead us to truth, beauty and love? If not, then perhaps it is time to find ways this year to renew our faith. And if so, then let us continue to walk on this earth in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May our marks burn with a passion for justice! May we seek to be God's people at work and at home. May the seal on our foreheads be a mark on our hearts in all the cares and activities of our lives.