

But for the Grace of God – Epiphany 2C

On that great day, says the Lord, you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. Our readings today explore to what might seem the n'th degree, the analogy of marriage as Godly relationship. Some newlyweds do change their names, it's true, perhaps most, one way or t'other, but regardless of the details, whatever new identity we bear upon marrying must include that of *Committedoras* -- promismakers who are promise keepers.

One of our most revered teachers in the seminary was Margaret Farley. She taught ethics. She is a Roman Catholic Nun who believes in womens' ordination and other disputed rights. For her book *Just Love*, she was reprimanded by the Vatican for anti-Catholic teaching, but lauded by the rank and file for her courageous truth-telling and forward-thinking. Another of her works is entitled *Personal Commitments; Beginning, Keeping, Changing*, a clear and deeply spiritual guide to the oft-assailed but humanly unavoidable reality of interpersonal endings and new beginnings.

Perhaps our true vocation as Christians is to be continually seeking commitments. We may think we know what we believe in, but, if success and longevity are not true measures of virtue, as surely they cannot be, our credulity must be based in the behaviors we do. For, as humans, we are addicted to doing things, as well as to thinking and the forming of ideological purpose. We want something to live for. A great historian has reminded us that, for the most part, people do not willingly die or kill each other for places, or for things, or even for other people. But we will die and kill for ideas.

Now, what has been revealed in this, our Epiphany: the grace of God has given us in Christ, glorious, compelling, and sufficient proof of an idea we don't have to die for – although many have – because death is no longer the issue. The issue is reconciliation, self-forgiveness, peace and compassion. It's an idea we can die with instead of for.

So, we engage inactivity to realize that idea, the activity is Love. How hard we the “enlightened” in the West have fought to make it seem that love is “subjective” or “multivalent” or difficult or complicated. It isn't. Not because there aren't as many ways of love as there are people, but because love is always in and of the heart, where God resides, as she does within us. Thus our primary activity is to ready our hearts for gentler life, through prayer and song; through conversation and creative endeavor. God will take care of the rest. We will be making decisions from our hearts, if we're trying even a little to be God's people, and lots of those decisions will prove to be wrong, which means we will have to make lots more. But, no matter how wrong we are, our purpose, our meaning, our salvation is in the trying, the orientation. By the grace of God we will observe carefully the preparation, the substance and the aftermath of our decisionmaking, and pray for the faith, the strength and the wit to make our decisions increasingly charitable, clever and pleasurable for all who are affected by them. That's why we try, because we know that's what God wants us to do: Care for the Poor, Take Care of the Planet, Have a Ball.

This trying is the big commitment we make. Deciding to live this way is how we can marry life, how we can marry God. It is the undertaking that makes us “a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem in the hand of God.” (Which are the same thing, crown and diadem). It has certainly not been our

consistent behavior on this Earth. Historically, our behavior has proved problematic, at best. Wysława Szymborska wrote:

..Perhaps all fields are battlefields,
those we remember
and those that are forgotten:
the birch forests and the cedar forests,
the snow and the sand, the iridescent swamps
and the canyons of black defeat,
where now, when the need strikes, you don't cower
under a bush but go behind it.

No, we are not crowns in God's diadem because of our perfect behavior, but because of the desire in our hearts to be better. In the minds of those who have it, this desire is often accompanied by the determination to persevere in the face of seemingly ludicrous odds. We live and love even though we know we will suffer and die. We give and let live, even though we know that others will often disagree with our choices, cast us out, even bring violence upon us... and fail to send us thank-you notes.

This permanent conundrum, this paradoxical pain in the beam is what impresses God enough about us to call us holy. What makes the world turn, what makes the society function, what makes God happy is the desire, the ability and the practice of commitment amongst humanity. Commitment, that is, to care for, nurture, support and listen to one another. Then we are no longer called "Forsaken," but instead begin a new life, in which our name becomes "My Delight Is in Her; My Delight is in Him," and our life shall be lived as ones "married;" for the Lord delights in those who are married. Just as one beloved person marries another, so shall Creation embrace us, so shall God rejoice over us.

Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing is the title of Professor, Sister Margaret Farley's book. Changing, because she has accepted, as must all humanity accept, that things change. Her wisdom is in illuminating the forgiveness and direction that God offers when we have commitments that do not hold. How to change graciously when commitments are no longer purposeful and wholehearted is a question at the center of our common life. Our determination to follow this direction puts us Episcopalians in the theological dog house for accepting what seem like indisputable changes in our knowledge of what God means by charity, self-knowledge, wholeness and peace. But one could turn those strident labels on their heads by admitting that being "Conservative" means preserving the right of all to make whatever commitments work for them, (unless they include violence); that forcing others to behave the way those in power want them to is being too "Liberal."

We have prayerfully considered the objections they have to our commitments, we have discussed them, argued over them, fought about them and voted on them. We think we are right, and we probably are. But we also will carry forward the certain knowledge that God forgives the wrong, as long as their hearts mean well. Perhaps the luxuries of our standard of living have made us unreflective, arrogant and a little stupid, or perhaps they have created just enough space for us to make more godly and compassionate decisions on the subject of interpersonal relationships and their maintainable commitments. We do well to remember that our ways and our prosperity have been bought with the blood, sweat and tears of many about whom our decisions have been cruel and deadly. There is no high moral ground, even when the other fellow is wrong. Self-righteousness is one luxury we can never afford.