

Sunday, February 4, 2007
Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

Epiphany 5C

One of the occupational hazards of being a priest or minister is that most other people want to think or actually do think that you are somehow different from them. They think or believe that as a priest or minister, your thoughts are purer, your faith is deeper, your prayers are stronger, and your family life is more wholesome than everyone else's. I can vouch for this simply from my experience as one who has worn a clerical collar for nearly twenty-seven years.

The reactions to my clerical collar of people who are not active in a church are especially interesting. Some will go out of their way to avoid you when they see you coming; others will react in just the opposite way and be extremely polite and deferential. Some people will intentionally use a four-letter word in your presence and then with a grin say, "Oh, sorry about that reverend," just to get your goat. Others will let a four-letter word slip out accidentally and then blush with genuine embarrassment as though no clergy person had ever heard such a word before. I suppose the most pathetic reaction by another person wasn't directed to me personally but to my wife. When a doctor she worked for as a nurse learned that she was a priest's wife, he asked her, "Do you have a 'God is my copilot' bumper sticker on your car?" I told her she should have replied, "No. The bumper sticker on my car says, 'I love my job,'" with a heart in place of the word love.

I suppose it is understandable and even appropriate for the clergy to be held in higher esteem than the average Joe on the street. The scandals that have rocked the Roman Catholic and other churches in recent years have shaken people's belief in the sanctity of the clerical calling. People want to believe and trust that the standards of the clergy are at least as high, if not higher, than the average used car salesman or member of Congress. It is damaging to the vocation of all clergy and to the church itself when on rare occasions this is found not to be so.

The actual truth of the matter is though, that if you scratch any clergy person deep enough, he or she is nothing other than a human being. If you don't believe this is true, ask my wife. If she won't tell you, ask my mother. This is true for every domination or religion, whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Shiite, or Hindu. Conferring the title "the Reverend" on a person does not magically make them more holy, humble, spiritual, patient, understanding, tolerant, or have any of the other qualities that we would like them to have. Scratch any of them deep enough and they are still Joe Schmoe from Kokomo. Let me say further that this is a good thing. It is better for the clergy to have a healthy sense of their humanness than an inflated sense of their holiness. When clergy like me think that they can walk on water, they are usually headed for a fall.

God only knows why God calls particular people to be prophets, priests or ministers. Take Isaiah for instance. He was not any more holy or righteous than

the next person, yet God called him to go be a prophet to the people of Israel. Or maybe it's because Isaiah just happens to show up one day at the Temple in Jerusalem and God thought, "Hmm, this guy looks like he will do." And so God comes to Isaiah in a vision while Isaiah sits there in the Temple minding his own business. Isaiah tells us what the vision is like. He says that he saw "The Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." And there are seraphs fluttering around doing what seraphs do, which is to make sure that Isaiah doesn't see anymore of God than he's supposed to see. And there is smoke, and there are voices crying aloud with the words, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Then the entire building shakes as though there were an earthquake.

Finally Isaiah says what you or I would have said, "I better get out of here before some one finds out who I am. I don't belong in here. I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah could not have foreseen what happens next. One of those wily little seraphs grabs a pair of tongs, flutters over to the incense pot, and picks up a chunk of hot charcoal and touches Isaiah's lips with the hot coal. "Okay," says the seraph; "That takes care of that. You're unclean lips are now clean; your sins are taken away." When the Lord God says to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah now does not hesitate. He says, "Here I am Lord; send me." It's amazing what one hot coal on the lips will do,

isn't? (By the way, that was the original meaning of "hot lips." It wasn't at all what we think it means today.)

As a member of the clergy who has tried somewhat feebly these last twenty-seven years to uphold clerical standards, I find this reading today particularly reassuring. It tells us that God does not choose people to be ministers, priest, prophets or apostles because they are holy. And there is a good reason for that: no such person exists. In its purist form, that's what the Protestant tradition teaches us. The strictest of all Protestants in the early years of the Protestant reformation followed the teachings of John Calvin who taught that all human beings are sinful to the core and that they will always be that way, and that we can do nothing to change it. Yet even strict Calvinists like the Puritans who first settled New England tried to live as though they were holy, different and separate from the rest of the sinful world.

Can people work at becoming holy even without charcoal being touched to their lips? Different people have come down on opposite sides of the question as to whether holiness can be achieved in the Christian life. I can't say I have had much success with it. Quite honestly, I have known a few lay people who I would describe as more holy than any priest or minister I ever knew. So who God calls to be ministers in the church is ultimately a mystery. As for me, I will continue to

work at becoming more holy. But if I ever become so holy that you can't stand me, let me know. That's when I will have to start again.