

Sermon Preached at The Church of the Holy Trinity
Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia
Sunday January 11 2015
The Reverend Alan Neale
"Well, you know now..."

"MAUD Muller, on a summer's day,
Raked the meadow sweet with hay.
Beneath her torn hat glowed the wealth
Of simple beauty and rustic health"

So begins the poem Maud Muller written by John Greenleaf Whittier in 1856. The poem tells the story of a servant girl Maud Miller and an unnamed Judge. They meet briefly and all suggests that despite the difference in social background they will marry but... they do not. Towards the end of the poem Maud in reflective and pensive mood whispers poignantly "it might have been". The poem concludes,

"God pity them both! and pity us all
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall.
For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

"It might have been".

Acts 19:1-2 "Now, it happened that while Apollos was away in Corinth, Paul made his way down through the mountains, came to Ephesus, and happened on some disciples there. The first thing he said was, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside you?" "We've never even heard of that—a Holy Spirit? God within us?"

In the spiritual life, in our journey from and with and to the divine, "for of all sad words on paper and in chat, the saddest are these 'we never even heard of that'".

Paul with businesslike and professional expertise gets to work on those Ephesian dozen - he lays those gnarled, strong tent-maker hands on them and all heaven breaks loose... the Holy Spirit zooms in (sorry!), they speak in angelic tongues and they prophesy and with authority speak the word of the Lord. And I can imagine as Paul walked away

from that little ecclesiastical party he mumbled to himself, "You never even heard of that... well, you know now!". Contemporary Christians, you and me (well, as contemporary as these vestments permit me to look!), contemporary Christians with nearly a whole year before us are to be pitied if we are akin in ignorance to those Ephesian Christians.

Imagine the poignant lot of Lincoln and Miles if once baptized they grow into young men unaware of the limitless grace of God and the unfathomable power of God; pity them, and all of us, if once baptized we set ourselves on a journey to live lives of grace and kindness, of compassion and forgiveness but without the interior, indwelling presence of the power of God, the dynamite of God, the energy of God.

And what if they were to turn to parents and sponsors, to church and religious teachers and bewail, "But you never told us". What if... what if... what if!

The baptism of Jesus with body submerged in, emerging from the Jordan is, dare I say it, only half-done until the words of affirmation and dedication are heard, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased and upon you my favor rests". Message Translation "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life".

Woe to the ordained minister, woe to the church community that keeps this life transforming message from ears and eyes of hearts and minds of all those in proximity of church edifice, church worship and church life.

And as we proclaim and declare boldly, or suggest and whisper hesitantly this message... we can say, "Well you know now; you heard it here".

It is the presence of ignorance of our divine status, it is the refusal to let such knowledge invade us that sets up patterns of dysfunctional living; patterns in which we "don't know and we don't care" about the plight of those who harm or belittle us and that ignorance we maintain for it seems to give permission to harm and belittle in return.

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

Friends you here it now, and in many ways, in Scripture and Sermon, in Music and In Sacrament - "God loves you just the way you are, and God loves you so much She/He wants you to change"... and this is by the gift of the Holy Spirit offered to you, to me and to this church community... and don't say you don't know, you heard it here and now you know. AMEN