



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday After Trinity, June 6th, 2010

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

There comes a time in every Christian's spiritual journey when he – or she – has to stop studying the faith and start practicing it. This might sound a bit confusing. After all, many churchgoers appear to be under the impression that studying the faith and practicing it are simply one and the same thing.

Many Christians consider that to be truly pious you need to spend hours on end on your knees, and the rest of your free time poring over the Bible. And, indeed, there are churches that teach salvation lies in intellectually affirming all the complicated doctrines that can extrapolated from the Bible.

Francis of Assisi – a genuinely pious person if ever there were one – would have found such a notion very peculiar. Francis was not overly impressed by study. His younger friars once asked him if they might have Psalters so they could sing the psalms. "No," said Francis. "Why not?" asked the brothers. "Because the next thing you'll want is prayer books," the saint replied.

Francis was not trying to denigrate the value

of church services or Bible study. He believed it was the job of priests and deacons to conduct services, freeing up the rest of the community to address the really important task of spreading the Gospel by practicing the faith. "Preach the Gospel," he would tell his followers, adding, grudgingly: "Use words if you have to . . ."

There's no denying St. Francis was a tad eccentric. But his approach to the faith was by no means the product of his own imagination. He took to the religious life after a vision of Christ told him: "Rebuild my Church."

With characteristic zeal, Francis immediately liberated a huge quantity of expensive cloth from his father's warehouse, turned it into cash, and set about repairing the tumble-down chapel next door to his family home.

His parish priest gently explained to him that Jesus was probably talking about the Church as whole -- which was going through a bad patch at the time – rather than one particular edifice. Besides, Robin Hood's philosophy notwithstanding, it was

rather better to use one's own money to perform acts of charity than to steal it from somebody else, even one's long suffering dad.

So where did Francis get his ideas about preaching the Gospel by example? One place was today's communion epistle I John 4:7-21 – which might well be termed: "Fellowship with God 101." St. John's purpose is to bring us into fellowship with God with the exposition of the revelation: "God is love."

Verses 7 & 8 read: "Beloved let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." And he reiterates this theme in Verse 16: "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

St. John explains to us that God is perfect love – and not any abstract way. He is love in living, personal activity and in relationships. Love, says John, is the highest attribute of God's being. God's love has been manifest in two ways. First, he sent his only Son Jesus Christ into the world to redeem mankind from sin and to give us eternal life in fellowship with him. In doing so, he has saved us from all the fears that would normally torment us concerning our inevitable judgment.

Second, God has manifest his love to us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts – kindling in us a love that is both a response to his outreach to us, and a love displayed in our love for our fellows. Because God loves, we love; and as he loves, so ought we to love one another. The

love we show our neighbors is the acid test of the sincerity of our love of the invisible Father, made known to us by Jesus.

This echoes Jesus' summary of the Law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great Commandment. And the Second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

John says God is perfect light; perfect righteousness; and perfect love. In other words, God is certainly not uncritically loving and non-judgmental. Thus we can't be uncritically loving and non-judgmental either. In other words, we are not loving our neighbors if we fail to preach the Gospel to them. Standing idly by while they trip merrily down the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire is does not exactly amount to a display of Christian love.

But preaching the Gospel by harping on our neighbor's shortcomings and nagging them about unpleasant habits is not likely to be very effective. In fact, they might well think we are a bunch of hypocritical Holy Joes blind to our own faults while picking on the sins of others. And they'd be entirely justified.

In other words, St. Francis was right on the money. The best way to preach the Gospel to your friends and neighbors is in the way you behave towards them, In other words, preach the Gospel constantly, and only use words if you absolutely have to. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,
Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***