

## Life in Pencil

As the adventure that is the season of Epiphany and our own lives continues, I was thinking about sermons and the place they have in our worship. Not speeches, really, not lectures, no, not really talks, no, but maybe more like conversations, four way conversations between the preacher, the listener, the scriptures, and God. Sermons have a life of their own, you know. Once the words have left the preacher's mouth, they are owned by the listener, and what they, you, do with them is up to you, the unique human being that you are, your life and all its complexities, and of, course, the Holy Spirit. God has a role in what the listener does with the preacher's message. In my experience, sermons have a life cycle, that is, they germinate, are born, live, and well, not die, but go where old sermons go, I don't know, to some old musty file cabinet, or perhaps to live forever on the internet.

This sermon germinated over the last week, and really was born yesterday during the monthly men's conversation. I made an offhand comment about my new retro calendar, and a sermon title was born. The title? Life in Pencil. Catchy, huh? Wonder what it means?

For me, it started with a Palm PDA that someone gave me in the late nineties. That device replaced my very serviceable pen and paper calendar system, and I loved it. Able to sync with my desktop, I always had a backup calendar. Then I graduated to my iPhone. Loved it! Very flexible and able to sync with my desktop Outlook calendar for backup. Then it betrayed me. Yes. The smart phone calendar refused to sync with my desktop Outlook calendar, the backup and ultimate authority of my whole calendar system. Messed up, huh? Gotta have a back up. Can't let things slip through the cracks, too many people depend on me.

So I'm back to paper, but this time I'm not using pen, but pencil. See when I had a retro calendar back when paper and pen were not retro, I found that many of the things on my calendar and to do list had to be moved, changed, crossed out, added to and the whole thing became a mess. That's why I was so happy to have a PDA and then a smart phone. A few simple clicks and an event could be moved changed, or eliminated. Ahhh. Simplicity. At least for a while. Back now to my retro calendar, where I am only using pencil. Too many things change to use pen. Very few things can be written in ink. Or engraved in stone.

Some of the changes are simple, and in the grand scheme of things, insignificant. For instance, one person and I have now changed our lunch appointment four times. So much easier to erase and rewrite, than to cross-out, or draw lines, or put stars with a "see whatever" notation. Life in pencil.

Notes of things to do that get left undone in the press of busy days are best in pencil, too.

Sometimes, life in pencil is caused by the very serious things that can confront us. When a family member living at a distance is near death, plans are fluid and can and will change when the death does occur. Before that, life must be written in pencil.

Some things that cause life to be written in pencil are:

An unexpected promotion and move comes.

Experiencing what retirement is all about for you.

Living through a time of illness and recovery.

Living through problems with a child or a parent.

Healing a marriage going through difficult times.

Recovery from addictions.

Losing a job.

Moving to a new home.

Starting at a new school.

In the life of our parish, or any community for that matter, there is much that is better written in pencil. Two years ago, none of us could have penned out that we would build a prayer garden and labyrinth, a BBQ and fellowship plaza, and install a new roof and solar system in 2011. At the beginning of last year, few would have written in pen that we would raise a record amount of money at our Oktoberfest, and that we would give a total of over \$80,000 to worthy causes. At the Annual Meeting after the 10:00 service, you will hear about the work of our Long Range Planning committee, a “virtual and organic” long range plan for our campus that can and will change over time. While not written in pencil, it is also not carved in stone!

Sometimes, perhaps often, life lived in pencil is better than in pen. It keeps us flexible, open to new ideas, able to deal with new realities, able to face unexpected challenges.

Take the gospel reading today for example. The people in the gospel scene today expected a particular kind of prophet, and are shocked to get Jesus. They were expecting the kind of prophet that our first reading from Deuteronomy anticipates will come, a successor to Moses. In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel. But first, we might find a little background information helpful. Early on, when the Israelites in the desert experienced the presence of God in the mountain's storm, even from a distance, they were afraid. The Book of Exodus tells us of the, “...thunderings and lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking,” which terrified the people (Exodus 20:18-19). Out of their very real but reverent fear they chose Moses to be their go-between with God.

That first reading today hearkens back to the Exodus account and Moses makes a promise to the people that God will raise up another prophet, like Moses, to bring God's words to them. God keeps promises and so with Moses there began a line of prophets who weren't afraid to stand before God on behalf of the people; and equally unafraid to face the people on behalf of God to name their sins for them. According to biblical history, that line of prophets ceased several centuries before Jesus was born. But people interpreted that period as a time of expectancy, watching for God to come in force on a great day to destroy the wicked and to raise up the just.

In their expectation and understanding, that day would begin with the return of Elijah, one of the prophets to follow Moses, and would end in the arrival of another great prophet like Moses. Can you see where this is going? – to the gospel and the arrival of Jesus who, in the synagogue, confronts the unclean spirit in the man. In Jesus, the powers of evil are being threatened, so much so that they cry out, "I know who you are – the Holy One of God."

Jesus speaks with the authority of a prophet, but he's different. The prophets always referred to God when they spoke. "Thus says the Lord," is the common introduction or conclusion of the words of a prophet – their authority came from God. But Jesus speaks from his own authority and orders the spirit, "Be silent, and come out of him!" The people sensed someone new and different was happening, something they did not expect. "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!" All the expectations that they had written figuratively in pen had to be crossed out, deleted, and written over. Where God is concerned, better to write in pencil than in pen. God moves beyond the limitations of our expectations. That, you can write in pen.

So, if quite a few in our lives can be written in pencil, what can we write in pen? What stands the test of time? What endures? What universal truths are there? Wow! You ask a lot of questions!

Let's start with some simple things, OK. Whom do you love? You can write that in pen. I love you. Not the sloppy romantic notion of love, but true love, love that wants nothing more than what is best for the other person. Paul reminds us that "love builds up." Love "endures." Love stands the test of time. Love can be written in pen, if we are willing to work at love.

How about those things Jesus told us to do?

He told us to pray, so prayer can be written in pen, although specific prayers had better be in pencil until we make sure that what we pray is in sync with God's will. He told us to serve those in need. That can be written in pen, and has been written in the lives of so many of our parishioners that served the guests of Winter Nights shelter this past week.

He told us to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, both of which we had better write in pen.

OK and here is the big one. Ready? God loves you. You can write that in pen – no, you can carve that in stone. Better yet, etch that into the far recesses of your mind, into the inner workings of your heart. Then shout it from the highest place you know. God loves you. God loves me. How about we all say it? God loves me. God loves me! What is that I hear? A still small voice that seems to be saying, yes, there it is, “Yes I do love you. Now act like it!” You might want to write that in pen!