

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Sermon
June 6, 2010 The Second Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. Canon Catherine Nichols

Well...first...I want to congratulate you for swimming to church today. (laughter) And second...I want to tell you a story. Some years ago, I was at a conference of Episcopal clergy in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. The conference included a Sunday, and we were offered a choice of churches at which to worship. Have any of you ever heard of the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church? Well, those among us who had, urged us to go there to experience hospitality, faith, and good ol' time enthusiasm.

Hospitality...we were warmly greeted four times, between our car and the front door of the church. Now, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church is an African-American church, and we four kinda' stood out, since we were the only white people in the whole place. So we were clearly "guests." But we weren't "visitors"--we were treated as "guests." After those first four greetings, we were again greeted warmly by the usher...who handed us our bulletins...and then the people who sat near us told us warmly how very happy they were, that we were there to worship God with them. Hospitality. And the expressed faith of those lovely people...Oooooooweee! How they sang...how they clapped...how glad they all seemed to be there, in their large beautiful church...worshipping their beloved God. You know how that feels.

Faith was a tangible ingredient in that room. And enthusiasm...I'll never forget the sermon. The head pastor, a very well known preacher was away, and his associate--a woman perhaps of middle age...(and this was several years ago--I thought she was kind of old) (laughter)...maybe middle-aged. Anyway, she preached with great fervor. And her subject? "Touch the beeah!" (meaning "bier.") She told the Gospel story we just heard--this wonderful story of Luke--when Jesus enters the gate of the town of Nain, to be met by a funeral procession. And a man's body is being carried on a bier, accompanied by his weeping mother and a crowd of townspeople. A bier was a littler, or a bed, on which a corpse was carried to the place of burial. And Jesus knows in this story, that the weeping mother is a widow, and he knows that her life is now in shambles--as widows of his time were totally dependent on their sons. And in his compassion, he comforts her. "Do not weep." And then he touches the bier, and those carrying the body on that bier stop. Jesus cries out to the man to rise, and yet another miracle by the God/Man from Nazareth, astounds the people. Jesus touches the bier, and the man is reborn.

The picture of a desolate widow sobbing, accompanying her dead son through the gate of a village, is cracked into pieces, by Jesus' radical action. "Touch the beeah!" The widow's life is transformed, the son's life is resumed...a new picture which includes fear and praise, astonishment and joy...envelops the gate of the town of Nain. Life for those villagers will never again be the same. Jesus has...in the words of the preacher of the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church..."touched the beeah!" I mentioned enthusiasm. The preacher's enthusiasm was such that...when she finished her powerful message, urging all of us to be courageous...to "touch the beeah," she ran down the

steps of the pulpit--a pulpit much like this one---and ran around in circles for a minute. We loved it. Enthusiasm...she was filled with the Spirit.

We cool, calculated New Englanders...we Pacific Northwesterners...why don't we show our enthusiasm like that? What is it about us? Because we don't... But that doesn't mean that I can't urge you all..."y'all"...in powerful fashion to "touch the beeah!" Because I'm gonna' do it. I want us all to think about touching the bier. So what did she mean by that--"touch the beeah?" She meant live in faith. But even moreso, she meant act in faith. Risk...act...dissolve pictures, so they will be replaced by new and different pictures.

Look at how Paul goes out into the world, and spreads his new infectious enthusiasm. He tells us in today's section from his letter to the church in Galatia: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God...but when God was pleased to reveal his Son to me...I proclaimed him." We all know Paul proclaimed him. We know of Paul's zeal, his enthusiasm. He reached out, he touched the bier, he acted in faith. And he changed the world, all around the Mediterranean Basin. Elijah cried out to his God in faith. He touched the bier of another woman's dead son. He climbed onto the body. What a strange story. And called to God three times: "Let this child's life come into him again!" And it did. We're all invited. No--we're all challenged, to reach out and touch the bier. We're challenged to risk our dignity, our reputation, even sometimes our livelihood...to make a change. To heal broken hearts in God's world. Both the widows--the widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain--cried from their acutely broken hearts, to God's healer. Elijah. Jesus.

How do we act for Elijah and Jesus? How do we call for restored life? Well, we may not touch the bier as dramatically as either Elijah or Jesus, but we touch the bier when we feed the hungry. We touch the bier when we serve the sick, when we clothe the naked. Oscar Wilde is said to have written: "How else, but through a broken heart, may the Lord Christ enter in?" "How else, but through a broken heart, may the Lord Christ enter in?" A broken heart walked along next to that bier. A broken heart of a woman who believed that her life--as well as that of her son--was over. Jesus touched the bier, and restored two lives. You too--all of us--can touch that bier, in all sorts of ways. We can be sent by God to bring healing. It can be as dramatic as an intervention--the risk of confronting a loved one whose life is broken by addiction. Touching that person's life with radical love. If the result is sobriety...coming clean...that person has gained new life. You've touched the bier. Or it can be as simple as inviting a lonely friend to come with you to Trinity...all of us committed to this parish community, would wish for her to feel a warm welcome...hospitality...like we felt in Memphis. We'd hope that we would observe varied expressions of faith on the part of many of us...faith. We'd hope that she would observe enthusiasm in our praise of God through liturgy. And through action. Action whether it be outreach towards our brothers and sisters in the greater Portland community. Or what I call "inreach," towards our sisters and brothers who are fellow-members, and need pastoral care. A grief group. Or communion in their sick-room. Or regular notes and letters to keep them connected to us. Or prayers for them, in worship. Action expresses our enthusiasm. Enthusiasm filled by the Spirit.

So I echo the Memphis preacher in her enthusiasm, as I challenge “y’all” to “touch the beeah!” Be a bearer of healing in this world. Help the Lord Christ enter into the broken hearts of others. Touch that “beeah!” Oooooooweee! You’ll be so glad you did!

Amen.