

July 23, 2006
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Dick Massaro, preaching

Rags, Old Iron, and God

A quick question!

Has anyone else here...had that wonderful experience,
as a kid, of getting chips of ice from the back of
the ice man's truck on a hot summer day?

Good! Then after worship you can help explain to
those folks with puzzled looks.....how the Ice man
responded to a sign in your window

and delivered blocks of ice for your ice box.. In the neighborhood of my youth a small
shopping mall
came to your house on wheels.

Does a patient who has just heard the Doctor say
something about a spot showing up on his
lungs suddenly hear the junkman's cry
off in the distance?

Do Parents hear it when two sixteen year olds
stand nervously in the Family room
Not knowing what to say..until
he finally blurts out...

"They said she's pregnant."?
And a few more dreams are tossed into that
ancient truck bed.

Old rags. Old dreams.

The junkman had passed through the alleys of
Israel many times before the prophet
spoke the words we heard this morning..
And Israel had seen a sense of community being
hailed away..

"We are no longer like the tribes of
your heritage, O God..."

Isaiah said, in effect,

We have lost our identity...

"We are like those who are not called
by your name."

Isaiah's people are in trouble, drifting, aimless.

They see themselves as a people
cut off from the past...
and devoid of a future.

And so the prophet pleads for God
to intervene.

He knows that people who can not
retain their tie to a rich heritage;

People who have not passed on a
great vision,
with a great hope for the future;
Such people perish.

The junkman has passed down the alleys of the
Church often during my ministry and in the
lifetime of many here.

"I have a dream! Martin cried
Oh yes I have a dream!"
and many of us sang...

"We shall Overcome..

We shall overcome!"

"I propose one church." Gene Blake said..

at once Catholic,
at once Reformed..
at once Evangelical"

And a little aged Pope, in the few short months..
of his papacy,
"opened a window that let in a fresh breeze
of the spirit..."
And we sang.. "They shall know we are Christians
by our love."

Old dreams...Old rags...
I am not a prophet...I'm just a
gracefully aging retired pastor...
But it seems to me..the junkman
has hauled too many old dreams
down the alleys of our nation in
recent years..
We have seen the Twin Towers tumble,
Mosques held sacred by thousands shattered.
We see the results of genocide and famine,
Homeless Americans still homeless after
flood and storm.
And the increased turmoil in the Middle East.
We pray for those who stand in harms way
in distant lands;
Grieve for the fallen and attempt
to aid the wounded.
And the Church!
The Church, all too often looks on,
Twiddling her Creedal Thumbs.
Mission dollars dwindle.
Efforts to be a healing presence,
a prophetic presence fade.

Too man Church Folks are far too busy playing the Gottcha game.
" I'm more righteous than you are brother!
And if you can't be as pure as me...
I'm walking out the sanctuary door...
Every denomination,
Including our own,
seems to have within it,
those who appear almost eager to split..
Ready to form a "More perfect union"
by once again...dividing the Church
Universal into even smaller pieces.
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble...
tremble tremble....

If there ever was a time when
the world needed the witness of
a Christian Church that will stand up
for justice...attempt to heal the wounds of
poverty, oppression, and truly show

we are Christians by our love.
That time is now...!

Now I have to be careful.

I made a note here - "Do Not Scold!"

I forget too many things these days...

But little exchanges from the past
stick in the mind..

There was a time when a small group of
from this congregation ..gathered to study
the lectionary readings two weeks
in advance of a Sunday sermon and then also
critique the previous Sundays effort.

And I still, painfully, remember
the comment of one participant who will remain
nameless. Well, this retired editor on one occasion said something like this to me: "You
know Dick, I don't know all that's
going on in your professional life lately,
And I don't want to know what's going on in
your personal life; But after these last
few sermonsI wonder: Isn't there
something about Grace in the scripture? And I looked back..and he was right.

I was coming off with a lot of gloom and doom.

On the edge of being a practicing cynic.

So I posted a sign above my typewriter that
said "Grace---more than 50%Grace!"

So I want to say....I continue to be almost sinfully
proud of the way this congregation, and
individuals within it...have been leaders...in
so many positive, healing matters within
this community and beyond.

So many times this community of faith has...been a
leading light.

May it never become a wavering one!

And Grace does matter.

Kim, beautifully reminded us of that fact last
Sunday.

The fact is God does love us.

And we know...at least we have been told over and over again.. If we have faith...

God will take care of what happens
to us after death.

We don't earn our way to heaven by our deeds.

And we certainly don't earn our way by
our theologically pure debates.

God's Love is a gift.

When we really believe that,

We can stop being so concerned about the end
times or the hereafter,

And we are freed up to do something about

these times and life in the here and now.
Trust God to deal with the there and when.

That is why it is so sad and troubling to see and hear about so many folk in the greater Church
leaving the theater before the last act has
begun.

Paying So much attention to things about which
Jesus seemed never or seldom to pay
attention too,

For that reason alone,,,Our response to God's
love and trust is something from which we
can never retire.

And a proper response includes demonstrating the
difference between
being at the end of things or
the edge of things.

And we are at the edge of God's future.
We can still see Easter from this side of the cross

The John McPhee Reader is a collection of short articles.
One of my favorites is a profile of Bill Bradley. Bradley, many of you know,
was a Rhodes Scholar from Princeton,
a former Senator from New Jersey,
and a more than fair basketball player.

In one paragraph,McPhee writes:

"I asked him what he called his over-the-shoulder shot.
He said he had never heard a name for it,
but that he had seen Oscar Robertson
and Jerry West do it, and had worked
it out for himself.

He went on to say that it is a much simpler
shot than it appears to be, and to illustrate,
he tossed the ball over his shoulder and into the
basket while he was looking me in the eye.
I retrieved the ball and handed it back to him.

"When you have played basketball for a while
you don't need to look at the basket
when you are in close like this."
he said, throwing it over his shoulder again and
right through the hoop.
"You develop a sense of where you are."

Now that's a great line..
"You develop a sense of where you are."

There are times when we enjoy the luxury of looking back at the way things use to be.

in the world ..in the nation..in the church...
Kind of like I like to reminisce about the
good old days of snitching a chunk of ice off
the back of the truck.

You know, "The good old days!" when we didn't have refrigeration or air conditioning...

When the Doctor came to the Massaro
house to deliver the Massaro boys..

Those of us that were able to survive without
modern hospitals with pre and post natal care.

That's a good thing to do from time to time..

Because we worship a God that is the God of history and we can see God's handiwork there.

But God is always on the move.

We have to develop a sense of where we are now..
and where God is leading us now.

And you can only get that sense,

If you stay in the game,
if you practice day after day.

That's the task we all share;

The work of the Church today;

Holding up Christ's vision for the future,

By what we do as well as what we say.

The vision of a peaceable Kingdom

Where the wolf and the lamb shall
feed together..

A future in which God will wipe away
every tear from the eye..

You hold up the future which is God's

And live it out - together..

One day hold up the future which is God's
You hold up the future which is God's
And live it out - together..

Christ...is here...

Amen!