



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Baptism – Belonging and Beginnings

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

All Saints Sunday, 2011

On this day, we give thanks for every saint, those who have gone before, those who are living still, those whose names are well known and those known only to God. Saints are known for their goodness, their commitment and dedication to God and to the work of the church to transform the world. In celebrating these Christians we proclaim our ongoing relationship with them. I'm particularly good friends with St. Anthony who always comes through to help me find whatever I have lost. We gather on the Green to bless our furry friends in the name of St. Francis. When we travel, we invoke the protective name of St. Christopher and when there is a house to be sold, chances are there is a statue of St. Joseph buried head down in the yard – I don't know why that one works.

The official process for making someone a saint is quite involved and does not even happen in the Episcopal Church. But we still manage to lift up those whose lives inspire us. We have a separate calendar known as *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* which lists many traditional saints, Augustine and Mary Magdalene, all of the evangelists, quite a few considered heretics by Rome, Martin Luther, William Tyndale who dared translate the Bible into English and was strangled and then burned for his reward, Thomas Cranmer (the author of the first *Book of Common Prayer*) was likewise burned at the stake during the reign of Mary of England, the one known as "Bloody." We also list those who helped to form the Episcopal Church, Connecticut's own Bishop Samuel Seabury, Bishop William White of Pennsylvania who drafted the founding documents of our church and Absalom Jones, the first black priest, ordained in 1802. There are four women who share a day; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Ross Tubman who all worked for the emancipation of slaves and women. Florence Nightingale, a good Anglican, has her own day. And who could forget Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky – I always forget what he did, but I love to say his name. The most contemporary figure in the *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* is Jonathan Myrick Daniels who was a gentle young Episcopal seminarian in Boston who went to Selma, Alabama in 1965 to be a part of the Civil Rights movement. He was killed as he stepped in front a 16 year old girl to protect her from a shotgun wielding angry white man. We remember Jonathan on August 14th.

It is into this church that we baptize Miles, Leah and Devin this morning and it is good for us to think about what that can mean for them and for us.

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Their baptism makes them Christians – it is their ritual entry into the Body of Christ. The fact that they are doing this here in the Episcopal Church in Branford makes them members of Trinity parish, the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut and The Episcopal Church. It's a small group, on a good day, nearly 2,000,000 members. It also means that they are linked to another 83 million people around the world through our common religious ancestor – The Church of England. These 85 million Anglicans (if you count us) come from 160 countries and we are as diverse as any group of people could possibly be. We cover the spectrum of theological and political beliefs and spend a lot of time trying to maintain our connections in spite of our differences.

We have a common process for making decisions. We call it our three legged stool, made up of scripture, tradition and reason. When we are faced with an issue, first we look to see what the Bible might have to say about it. Given the breadth of interpretation of scripture, those are lively conversations. Then we look at what the church throughout history has had to say, and finally we open it up to wisdom from many places; sociology, archeology, anthropology, and science from biology to quantum physics. And we listen to the still small voice of the Spirit along with the voices of the poor and the oppressed, those who have no voice but ours. When we do something new, it is always after much prayer, conversation and debate. We do this with everything from updating the prayer book, to approving the ordination for women and those in various places on the continuum of human sexuality. And it all happens democratically – lay people have equal authority as those who are ordained. It's really quite marvelous.

Being baptized in an Episcopal Church is not the only way to become an Episcopalian. We recognize everyone's baptism. The slogan 'The Episcopal Church Welcomes You' means just that. Anyone and everyone will find welcome through the often red doors of Episcopal Churches. Some of us interpret that welcome to extend to what is called open communion. The official position of The Episcopal Church is that communion is open to all baptized Christians. There is an energetic conversation happening now to remove even that qualification and make the communion table a welcoming place for anyone, whether or not they have been baptized. I believe that that is more of a Jesus approach and would have a hard time denying anyone who came and extended their hands, hoping to be fed. The conversation on open communion will be a good one.

But as far as membership in an Episcopal parish goes, all anyone need do is to have their baptism recorded in our church records. A copy of an old tattered baptismal certificate or a letter from the church where you were baptized including the date when it took place is all it takes to make our record-keeping little hearts happy and to record you as a member of Trinity Episcopal Church on the Green in Branford. And, as an added bonus, membership in the greater Episcopal Church.

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It is always hoped that people who are baptized as children, including these three, will one day chose to take responsibility for the promises made by their parents and God-parents and confirm their faith for themselves. What begins with baptism is a life-long journey of spiritual discovery and growth. In the Episcopal Church, these children can count on respect for the questions that they will have, support and tolerance as they weave in and out of participation on their way to discovering what they believe for themselves. They can have absolute confidence in never being told that they must believe a particular thing or a particular way. It is always better that someone is loved into believing than scared into it.

The reason that this church is committed to openness and freedom is because we understand that to be the way of Christ, Jesus said, "Come all of you who are weary of carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest and welcome." Whatever your burdens, isolation, disappointment, loneliness, fear, wounded places in your heart or soul...this is the place for you. It is the place prepared by centuries of saints, men and women, full of human frailty, but who knew of a greater love than we can imagine. They dedicated their lives to that love so that others might know it as well. And now we are privileged to welcome these three beautiful children into the family of love.

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