

Scripture

Ephesians 3:14-21 – For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon

Some of you know me already. I was a child of this church and spent most Sunday mornings sitting right there around the fourth or fifth row with my Dad and a couple of sisters. Of course, most of my attention during worship was focused on Stuart McMullen. He was a few years older than I was, the preacher's son, and he sat brooding on the front row week after week, slouched over with a scowl on his face. I thought he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Even though I was usually focused on the love of my life, I still remember some of the sermons Bob McMullen preached all those years ago. So it is pretty cool for me to be standing in this pulpit to preach my very second sermon to a real congregation.

I preached my very first sermon two months ago in the church where I am serving now. So when Jill asked me if I would preach this Sunday, I thought "fine, no problem, I've done it once, I can do it again!" So, I've had two classes in preaching and I know that there are certain steps to writing a sermon. The first step is to go to the lectionary and read the scriptures for that Sunday. Then you pick one or two to write about. Then you read the whole book. Then you follow the rest of the steps, which I can't tell you because then you'd all be able to do it, and I wouldn't be special. Of course, all of the steps are accompanied by a great amount of prayer.

Now everything was going along fine, in my mind, until Jill told me that the summer sermon series was based on saints. Now I ask you, what do I know from saints? I know that St. Francis loved animals, and St. Christopher medals are given to people in movies by their mothers, and I

know that St. Jude is in charge of hopeless causes. Other than that, I know bupkiss! I was raised a good Baptist girl – we don't do saints! I had to revise the steps. First, I had to figure out what exactly a saint is, so I went to my favorite place online (my favorite place next to the American Idol Website). Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, says that saints are holy people who are respected and viewed as role models. It says that in Protestant churches, the word is used to "refer to anyone who is a Christian." In Ephesians, Paul refers to the early Christians as saints about five or six times, so I figured it would be safe to go with the idea of saint as a living role model.

The saint that popped into my head and wouldn't ever quite leave, was Saint Biff. You see I've been reading Christopher Moore's book *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. In this book, Biff is the one person in the life of Jesus or Joshua, as Moore calls him, who Jesus can count on to help him figure things out when he has doubts, to lean on when things aren't going well, to tell him when he's doing something wrong, to just treat him like a real person. For example, there's the time when Joshua and Biff set out to find one of the magi who visited after Joshua was born. Jesus wants to know what to do as Messiah, but, as with many things in life, God has not provided an instruction manual. Biff tries to explain to his father why he must leave his apprenticeship and travel with Jesus:

Father: And who are these fellows you're looking for?

Biff: Magicians, I think.

Father: And you want to talk to magicians because...

Biff: Because Josh wants to know how to be the Messiah.

Father: Oh, right. And you believe that Joshua is the Messiah?

Biff: Yes, but more important than that, he's my friend, I can't let him go alone.

Father: And what if he's not the Messiah? What if you find these magicians and they tell you that Joshua is not what you think he is, that he's just a normal boy?

Biff: Well, he'll really need me to be there, then, won't he?

Then there was the time when Jesus and Biff were on their journey and Jesus was trying to figure out what was really important in God's laws:

Biff: Do you ever think of home?

Jesus: Yes. You know, the girls were cooking bacon today, and that made me think of home.

Biff: Why? I don't remember anyone ever cooking bacon at home.

Jesus: I know, but if we ate some bacon, no one at home would ever know.

Biff: Joshua, you're the Son of God. You're the Messiah. That implies – Oh, I don't know – that you're a Jew! You don't eat bacon.

Jesus: God doesn't care if we eat bacon. I can just feel it.

Biff: Really. He still feels the same way about killing?

Jesus: Yep.

Biff: Stealing? Bearing false witness? Coveting thy neighbor's wife, et cetera? No change of heart on those?

Jesus: Nope.

Biff: Just bacon. Interesting. You would have thought there'd be something about bacon in the prophecies of Isaiah.

Jesus: Yeah, makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Biff: You're going to need more than that to usher in the kingdom of God, Josh, no offense. We can't go home with, "Hi, I'm the Messiah, God wanted you to have this bacon."

Jesus: I know. We have much more to learn. But breakfasts will be more interesting!

The book is hilarious and very silly. Biff takes credit for inventing things from blond jokes, to fancy coffee drinks, to sarcasm. Still, I love the idea that Jesus had a St. Biff, that Jesus had a person in his life who loved him enough to tell him when he was off-track. Many of us have St. Biffs in our lives. One of my St. Biffs was a high school teacher named Johnnie Mae Tippen. She was a maiden lady who taught history and really cared about her students. Everyday she would barrel down the hallway like a line-backer with her clutch purse tucked under her arm like a football. She wouldn't talk to anyone, she didn't look to the left or the right, she made a straight path down the hallway and woe be it to anyone who got in her way. She wasn't a warm fuzzy person, but we all knew she loved us. One day, in my freshman year, Johnnie Mae Tippen sent a note to my Spanish class requesting my immediate presence in her room. I, of course, being a perfect student and teenager, had never been called out class before and was absolutely mortified. When I got to her room, she told me that something my friends and I had done as a harmless prank was not quite so harmless. She said "Mrs. Crispie, when you came to this school, I promised yoah muther that I would let you know if you were doin' anything wrawng. Well, Mrs. Crispie, you are doin' it." Let me tell you, I modified my behavior immediately. Many teachers would have simply written a note to my parents, but Johnnie Mae Tippen cared enough to talk to me directly.

It probably wasn't easy for her. It's not easy any of us. We are so worried about hurting each other that we sometimes find ourselves talking about people rather than to people. Now I let my mother read this sermon and at this point she said "You really need to develop that idea." So I've been struggling with that all week because I'm not sure I know how to do that. What I do know is that it's easy to talk about people. It's easy to go to a friend and say "Oh my gosh, Tiffany, he is sooo creepy" instead of going to the person who makes you uncomfortable and saying "I feel uneasy when you do that." I asked my son Michael "If you were doing something that ways driving your friends crazy, would you rather they were honest with you and told you or would you rather they just drifted away from the friendship." He gave me the typical teenage male answer "Uuhnnoouh." So I tried again. "All right," I said, "What about your friend Macy? She's been

your friend all the way through high school, stuck with you through thick and thin, what would she do if you were doing something that really bugged her?" He said "She'd punch me in the arm and tell me to cut it out!"

Now I'm not suggesting that we all go around punching each other and pointing out every little thing that annoys us. What I am suggesting is that when a behavior or circumstance causes us to drift away from people we care about, we need to deal with those issues head on. Isn't that what we promise each other in our covenant when we say that in response to God's love and forgiveness, we pledge to cultivate an open, caring church? I believe that's what the apostle Paul meant when he talked about being rooted and grounded in love. When he said, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." I believe we are to be St. Biffs for one another, so we can count on our brothers and sisters in Christ to love us no matter what, to be there for us when we feel lost, and to tell us when we need correcting. And they can count on us to do the same! It is a risk. We risk driving the other person further away. We also risk becoming closer. I'm not sure which risk is scarier, but I know that we have to decide if we love that person enough to take the risk. After all, the more we are lovingly honest with one another, the closer we become and the more efficiently we can work together as the Body of Christ in the world.