

The Rev. Harold Clinehens, Jr.
St. Wilfrid's Church

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"Grant, O Lord, that when we hear his voice, we may know him who calls us each by name."

First, I want to thank you... Over the last ten days I have received several wonderful, touching and heartfelt emails, cards, letters and phone calls expressing appreciation for my ministry here at St. Wilfrid's. I am aware that it is a rare thing in this world to be in the middle of something like this, and it is very stirring. So thank you.

I think most of you have heard me speak about my dog, Ruthie. She's a two-year old yellow Labrador Retriever. I just have so much fun observing her, because she has very good instincts. When she's sick, she knows it, and she doesn't eat. When she's tired, she takes a little nap. When she senses that I am tired or a little bit sad, she becomes very sweet and loving. Animals kinda get it; they're very much in tune with their surroundings.

But we humans---We are unique in not being able to see what is in front of us all the time. In fact, it's so ironic that sometimes we have to take the longest journey to arrive back at where we've been needing to go all the time. When it comes to matters of the spirit... matters of the soul... our hearing and our seeing is not so good. However, there are times in life when we glimpse the wholesomeness we are capable of.

Have you heard of this guy who has been walking across the United States for a little over a year now? His name is Steve Vaught and he calls himself "Fat Man Walking" because when he left his home in Oceanside, California, on April 10, 2005, he weighed 410 pounds and could not walk across the local Target store without stopping to catch his breath. Fed up with both his life and his body, he picked up a backpack and began a journey that he said wouldn't end until he reached New York City.

He attracted little attention at first, but by his 40th birthday last July, NBC's *Today* show carried his story. Now, it seems, lots of people have heard of him. He's lost about 120 pounds, and as of last Friday, the day I checked his website, he was 65 miles from New York City.

Now, all that walking...all that time to think has changed how he views the world. He says, "I think the aim of all human existence is happiness. Any effort in your life that is not directed toward your happiness and the happiness of the people around you is just wasted time."

If we were to change his words ever so slightly from happiness to wholeness, I believe he'd be saying something very close to the Gospel. Isn't it ironic and so lonesome that sometimes some of us have to walk 3000 miles to have that kind of insight come into us? Indeed, for many of us, it rarely occurs to us that we have souls at all.

I recently heard someone refer to stress as a perverted relationship to time. This makes a lot of sense to me. One of the things we observed in Tanzania is that Africans have a whole different relationship with time than we do. It is man who influences time, not the other way around. If a meeting is scheduled to take place, time springs into existence when everyone shows up. Then the meeting begins. If a bus is scheduled to take people from Arusha to Moshi, time springs into existence when the bus fills up. Then it leaves, and not a minute before. And in this way, time is subservient and therefore, dependent on humankind.

Not so for us. For us, time exists outside of us. We must heed deadlines, dates, days, and hours. And almost everyone in this country feels subservient to time. Time rules us. Time pressure is the perception that there is insufficient time to accomplish a specific task or tasks, which often leads to feelings of anxiety and tension. In its most severe and chronic form, time pressure and time urgency can lead to personality deterioration, mind racing and panic attacks. We do indeed have a perverted relationship with time.

Please listen with me again to the collect, the prayer we always say on the fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, we call it: "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people; Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads..."

Grant that *when* we hear his voice, not *if*... That's the part that really gets me. Because, you see, this prayer was written hundreds of years ago, long before our relationship with time got so perverted. The prayer assumes that we *will hear* the voice of Jesus speaking to us in our souls. This is a powerful word of hope for us... for many of us... for whom it rarely occurs that we have souls at all.

The prayer assumes that we all have the capacity to listen and to hear that still small voice of God whispering in the cavity of our ear... that still small voice Isaiah referred to over 700 years ago.

When "Fat Man Walking" began his trip, he was taking a fairly hefty dose of anti-depressants. By the time he got to Amarillo, Texas, he threw them down a sewer pipe. "What a complete waste of time," he says, "to walk across the country to do some soul-searching having been medicated the whole time."

By now, of course, he has turned down countless offers by pushy salesmen hoping for endorsements for their products. He was even offered \$5 million to market a weight-loss pill, kind of the ultimate irony.

He turned them down because he no longer believes in such quick fixes: "It's all about, Give me a pill, give me surgery, do anything but face reality...But how much does my integrity cost? I have done this walk to get my integrity back. I am not going to sell it."

I like what's happened to this guy on his journey, the transformation that is occurring in him. I like the fact that even though I don't see any "God talk" in his writing, he is obviously involved in a process of awakening the soul, and reporting it in a culture impatient with the power of the invisible. I like the fact that in the face of marketers that are all about selling us something that will give us results without disrupting our comfort, he has chosen the uncomfortable path.

I like his passion. I suppose that is because I have a lot of passion myself. I have been doing a lot of thinking lately about who I have been for you here, these last seven years. I was having a conversation with a friend a couple weeks ago, who helped me clarify things a bit. "You're a passion facilitator," she said. "You help people discover passion, not the new-agey 'passion in themselves,' but passion...spirit. You're a midwife to passion."

I've thought about that remark a lot since then and I think it's pretty accurate. That's pretty much what I do wherever I go. There's nothing that excites me more than turning someone on to God. There's nothing that has been so rewarding as seeing someone who is searching for a context for a deeper relationship with the Holy finding here in the liturgy, in the prayers, in our small groups, support for their journey. It was Plato who said that one of the greatest privileges of a human being is to become midwife to the birth of the soul in another person. And I have had that privilege.

I think it is also important for us to recognize that St. Wilfrid's is not some kind of static monolith to which people come---clergy and laity alike---and from which people leave. Whether we know it or not, communities, as well as individuals, are on spiritual journeys for the enlarging of the heart.

And one of the reflections we might consider over these next few weeks we have remaining with each other, is how have we touched each other? ...

And what has shifted?...

what kind of movement has occurred? ...

and what we have learned about the journey of this community and what I have learned about the journey of this rector, this priest, this man as a result of this engagement?

These are important questions for us to look at for the sake of the health and direction of our journeys as we continue them.

For example: The profile that was prepared about eight years ago, and that was sent out to candidates for rector, in describing St. Wilfrid's back then, said, and I quote, "We tend to become complacent?" I think that was courageous of the profile committee to put that description in there. But what happens in a church, especially a church that had been given very little advance warning... what happens when "complacent" meets "passion facilitator?" That would be just one question we could ponder over these next few weeks.

Part of my passion has been introducing the beauty of the Christian tradition, in all its complexity and richness. I think one of the reasons so many people these days won't even look in the direction of the church for help in dealing with spiritual matters is that so often the church is seen as offering simple answers to not so simple life questions...reducing the spiritual life down to the "Four Spiritual Laws" or something like that. We can't reduce the spiritual life down to simple, easy steps because we are not that simple.

The soul has a certain restlessness and a certain longing that will never be quiet. St. Augustine, almost 1600 years ago, said it best: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." That is an amazing mystical insight, because it reminds us...

...that what is deepest in us is not subject to our own damage, our limitation, our incapacity, but something beautiful that was given to us when we came here, and that is the soul. It has its origin in God and what it longs for all the time is God.

Eight hundred years after Augustine, Meister Eckhardt, a German mystic who spanned the 12th and 13th centuries, said that the most exciting thing in the world is the birth of God in the soul. He said it doesn't matter if the Son of God became man in the incarnation if he doesn't come to birth in your own soul.

And each one of us has the potential, because when your soul is awakened, you have received a gift that no one will ever be able to take away from you.

... A gift so strong and lasting that it doesn't matter that we live in a culture in which we are constantly being seduced to focus on the trivial and unimportant...

It doesn't matter that we have a perverted relationship with time...God is speaking to us...every day... all day...

"O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people; Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads..."

Amen.

I love you. Be happy.