

Advent 3B  
December 11, 2011  
St. Martin's Church  
Fr. Newell Graham

Have you ever noticed that when super-chef, Emeril Lagasse is about to appear on "Good Morning America", or some other program, they always show him smiling and stirring. Actually, he is kind of probing at his concoction in front of him, which we all know his assistants have made. But, no matter, Emeril just smiles and stirs... smiles and stirs.

I don't know if you know about this custom or not, but, this Third Sunday of Advent is something called "Stir-Up Sunday". That's because of the particular prayer, or collect, for this Sunday, which begins, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us..."

Do we really hear what we are asking? Do we? We are asking God to stir us up! Not the Emeril kind of stirring, either, but real stirring. We are asking for the kind of stirring we will feel all the way down into our souls, the kind of stirring that will do some real good. Now, I am not going to speak for you. I can only speak for myself, but I need stirring up from time to time. I know this about myself. Why do I need it? Well, it's just as the prayer says, "...because we are sorely hindered by our sins". I need stirring because I know this to be entirely true. *I am sorely hindered by my sins.*

Speaking for myself, I must acknowledge that I am hindered by the sin of being self-absorbed and self-obsessed. I share this sinful tendency with every human being since Eve. God, who created us in the first place, knows about this and loves us in spite of it. The nature of God's love, however, is that there's this kind of urgency on God's part. God's kind of loving will not allow Him to be content with our sinfulness. God is driven to act on our behalf. We even cry out for it in the prayer this morning, "...let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us!"

Advent is a season during which we are to think about and pray about, and prepare to meet the Lord; whether as a tiny newborn, shivering in the nights chill in a drafty

barn, or as the triumphant Lord in His second, and final, coming. Either way, we are, in fact, sorely hindered by our sins. The grace and mercy of God alone can “speedily help and deliver us”. There is no time to waste.

John the Baptist knew this better than any man before him or since. Listen again to John’s urgent proclamation, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’”. This was no half-hearted, tentative suggestion. This was John pleading with the people who came out to hear him to get their acts together, to turn their lives around. What I love and admire about John is that he always created a “stir”. He, like other prophets before him, understood his call from God to be a “stirrer”.

It’s funny, but whenever I think of dear John and his “ministry of stirring” I remember something that would almost always happen when I was a kid. We’d be riding along in the family sedan and there would be barn roofs painted “See Rock City” or “See Lookout Mountain”. They hardly ever got our notice or attention, but then we’d round the curve in the road and there would be another one that read, “Prepare to meet thy God!” It was like meeting John the Baptist. It always stirred me up!

My dear friends in Christ, this past year with all of you at St. Martins has been one of the most blessed and joyous years of my life as a priest. I am so pleased and grateful to be associated with this congregation of inspiring people. Thank you all for having me here with you!

Because I do care about you and the work and mission I believe God has called all of us to do, I will not do an “Emeril”. I will not just smile and poke and stir. St. Martin’s means far too much to me to do that! Rather, I want to stir you into action. I want to remind you, as I remind myself, that we are not here to be “spectators”. We are here as participants. Being an active participant means being a meaningful giver. If there is one sin that sorely hinders us, as the collect says, it would be that we are so self-focused that we are in denial. It is the sin of denying that which we all know to be and assuming that the church can somehow get along with less, or even worse, with no giving at all. This is big time denial!

All of us know very well that our bills and our expenses have to be paid even during a faltering economy. This is true of a parish church as well. All of us have our expectations about staff, and services, and programs that our parish should provide. The reality is that this simply cannot happen without meaningful and faithful giving on the part of all of us. And, there's more: the ministry of caring for which St. Martin's is known depends on the participation of every one of us.

Times are uncertain and difficult financially, but let's be sure we all understand what making a pledge is all about. Making a pledge of support to one's church is, first and foremost, an expression of gratitude for all that has been given. It is not an estimate or casual speculation about how much we'd like to give. A pledge is an act of faith. It is a promise of what we will give with God's help. We don't make a meaningful pledge believing that paying will be easy. A pledge is a promise of what we will give of our earnings, our energy and our enthusiasm – with God's help!

May we all ask God to stir us up with His great power and come among us. I promise great things will happen!

*Let us pray:*

*Stir us, O God. Blend us, each so different, each so unique, into a faith-stirred community with the full flavor of Godly excitement and boldness to serve.*

*Warm us, O God, with the fire of your love as we seek to share the cloak of caring with others.*

*Help us to truly understand that each of us has a role to play, that each of us is an essential ingredient in your recipe of redemption. May none of us be left out.*

*Stir us, O God. Stir us, we pray.*

*Amen.*