

For the people of St. Philip's
Jan. 22, 2006

I have a fish story from Sewanee.

As many of you know, I spent the past several days in Sewanee at a centering prayer retreat. St. Mary's retreat center is located on the Cumberland Plateau near Sewanee, TN. For those of you who aren't familiar with centering prayer, my time was spent in community with 27 people for eight days of silence and prayer.

We moved through the days together- praying, eating, and sitting together-- but we were freed to be in an inner solitude by not making eye contact nor speaking to each other during most of those days. Some of my dearest friends were also on that retreat. These dear folks I haven't been with much since we moved from Sewanee days after Rick's funeral there in August.

This space of time and place with quiet friends freed me to grieve openly and know that no one around me would feel compelled to soften the pain I was in, for I needed space to feel it. Their quiet presence was balm because they knew me and they knew Rick, and they deeply knew why I was crying. I thank all of you here for granting me that space of time and place to rest with them and with God.

Part of my routine after breakfast was to go on a long walk each day to a library on the edge of the bluff. I was having a hard time that particular morning. Part of my purpose in being at the retreat was to deeply contemplate my upcoming ordination to the priesthood, as it's been a long process of formation. I have enjoyed my ministry as a lay person, and I was trying to sort out what ordination means as we are all ministers in Christ by virtue of our baptism.

I found myself at the edge of a reflecting pond near the entrance to the library. As I stood there, weeping, I began to notice that over the course of about five minutes all the fish in the pond were slowly swimming toward me. There were hundreds of them, all different sizes, all looking at me with these big ol' fish eyes, all waiting expectantly. Slowly I realized that they were wanting something from me. They wanted me to feed them. They wanted bread.

I didn't have any bread.

They were nearly motionless, suspended at all levels in the pond, all facing me, all waiting for something. I stood there, empty handed, wondering where that bread might come from. Then it all came to me. John the Baptist in the recent lectionary readings saying of his friend Jesus, " I must decrease so that He might increase." Me, the future priest feeling rather small, with no bread. I look at the fish assembled, and I say to them, " I have no bread! Jesus, Jesus is the bread. It all has to come through him."

With that realization I was freed. Jesus is the Bread, the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven. All I have to do is open my hands, open my heart, and the Bread will come for the hungry fish.

" I will make you fishers of people, " Jesus says.

"Show me the way" says I.

" Come follow me." says Jesus.

I am a shy and reluctant fisher of people. Following Jesus is not an easy road. Thomas Merton struggled with many of the same questions and uncertainty that we all face. I spent a good deal of time contemplating his words on my retreat, and I have printed one of his prayers in my ordination bulletin. I'd like to read his prayer to you today.

(Thomas Merton prayer) cut and paste from ordination bulletin document +peace, Maria