

Epiphany 1 ~ January 10, 2010 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at *Old St. Andrew's Church*, Bloomfield, CT

Isaiah 43.1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus according to Luke. This is one of those Sundays set aside in the church calendar for people coming into the church to be baptized. We don't have a baptism this year, but we certainly have in the past.

In baptism, we, or our sponsors, our Godparents, make promises. You know them: *to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread together, and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil and repenting when we go wrong; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God's presence to us; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; and finally, to strive for justice and peace among all peoples, and respect the dignity of every human being.*

These are not insignificant comments, not glib words, or idle thoughts. Baptism is a sacred covenant. Baptism sets a standard for us. In baptism, we set the tone for how we intend to live our lives.

I am especially reminded of all of this today because on Friday I celebrated, with about 80 residents and staff of the Essex Meadows Health Center, the life of my cousin, Lytt Gould, who died at age 90 on December 30th. I don't know anyone who more fully lived out his baptismal covenant. Even in the waning months of his life, he continued to care for and about his fellow residents and the staff who cared for him and them.

Lytt was blessed with striking good looks and an infectious smile. A candle burned behind the pool of blue in his eyes. When he shook your hand, there was a true bond, one where you could feel the beating of your own heart and his. He was polite, smart, thoughtful, sensible, generous and most of all kind. He truly embodied the "blessing words" I sometimes use. You see, he was *swift to love and made haste to be kind.*

If any of us could boast one of his accomplishments in life, we would be proud. Educated at Hotchkiss School and Yale, he was Skipper of a sub-chaser during World War II. He married Sis Jackson, the widow of a classmate killed during the war and adopted her two children. Then, Lytt and Sis had two of their own. He became a teacher at Landon School in Bethesda, Maryland and in those years founded St. Francis Episcopal Church in Potomac, Maryland. He went on to become Headmaster at Far Hills Country Day School in New Jersey.

In the early '60s, Lytt and Sis recognized that growing up and going to school could be particularly difficult for some teenage girls. Not all of them fit into the round holes of the educational system. So, they founded Purnell School in Pottersville, New Jersey. There, *they teach differently because girls learn differently*. Quoting from their website, "Some girls need to discover success in a different way than those provided by traditional, competitive and large high schools. At Purnell, a girl [has] a chance to discover what she does best and to become the best she can at it." In Lytt's words, Purnell is a school for "salt of the earth girls."

Purnell opened in September 1965 with 18 girls. Now, there are over 1,200 alumnae. The guiding principles at Purnell are: *use common sense, be considerate of others, and be truthful in all relationships*. It doesn't get much better than that.

Lytt and Sis agreed from the start that they would give Purnell 10 years of hands-on leadership. As such, they retired to Lyme, Connecticut in 1974. Purnell continues to thrive.

In Lyme, for the past 35 years, has been a pioneering organization called High Hopes. It's a therapeutic riding program for people of all ages with physical handicaps. Sis, with Lytt's help, started High Hopes in their own small stable. It is now the premier therapeutic riding program in the country.

In addition, Lytt served on many boards—Mystic Seaport, Miss Porter's School, and The Garrison Forest School to name three. And even more importantly, he listened to myriad people who came to him for friendship and advice. Among them, me.

"Will you proclaim by word and example the *Good News* of God in Christ?" Lytt always saw Christ in the "other" such that simply being with him softened the heart and opened the mind.

All of this is quite self-referential, I know. After all, Lytt was my cousin and you didn't even know him. But, when I got home Friday night at about 9.30, I stood in the kitchen and said out loud to Lytt, who seemed to be standing right next to me, "I don't know if we can be as good and big and faithful as you were, but it sure is worth trying." So, in that moment, I decided to tell you about this remarkable man in the hopes that, perhaps, you, too, might be inspired.

One reaction to hearing about Lytt Gould could be, 'Oh, I could never be like him.' Or, another reaction might be, 'I haven't done anything like what he did.' Yes, he accomplished a lot. But that's not the point. The point is

that he took his baptismal covenant seriously every day. He tried to fulfill it the best he could. And, it was in the trying that all the difference was made.

Following the service this morning, we'll have a special fellowship and coffee to honor Phyllis Armstrong who has brought the gift of music to this church and others for decades. You see, she, like Lytt, has, in her own way, given her all too. She's tried to do her baptismal best.

And, just as significantly, three young women from the Metropolitan Learning Center will make a presentation about human trafficking, what is also called slavery, during our adult education time. Those students, just beginning their lives, like Lytt Gould, are awake to what is going on around them and wanting to teach others about the terror of this life-threatening crisis. Their cause is about justice and respect for the dignity of every human being.

I end by saying, YES, live these baptismal promises and values in your hearts and in your lives. As such, we can be ... *we are* ... the light of the world.

Amen.

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