

But for the Grace of God – Epiphany 2C

On that great day, says the Lord, you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. Our readings today explore to what might seem the n'th degree the analogy of marriage as Godly relationship. Some newlyweds do change their names, it's true, perhaps most, but regardless of the details, one hopes that whatever new identity we bear upon marrying includes that of "Committedors" – "Committedoras" -- promise makers who are promise keepers.

One of my most revered teachers in the seminary was Margaret Farley. She taught ethics. She is a Nun who believes in womens' ordination, but remains an (oft-scolded) Roman Catholic. My favorite book of hers is about commitments, how to begin, keep and change them. Her newest is called, *Just Love*.

Perhaps our true vocation as Christians is to be continually seeking commitments. We may think we know what we believe in, but, if success and longevity are not true measures, as surely they cannot be, our credulity must be based in activity. For, as humans, we are addicted to doing things, to thinking and the pursuit of ideological purpose. We want something to live for. A great historian has reminded us that, for the most part, people do not willingly die for for places, or for things, or even for other people. But we will die for ideas.

Now, it has been revealed: the grace of God has given us in Jesus Christ glorious, compelling, and sufficient, proof of an idea we don't have to die for – although many have – because death is no longer the issue. The issue is reconciliation, self-forgiveness,

peace and compassion. It's an idea we can die with instead of for.

So, we choose an activity to realize that idea, the activity is Love. How hard we the "enlightened" in the West have fought to make it seem that love is "subjective" or "multivalent" or difficult or complicated. It isn't. Not because there aren't as many ways of love as there are people, but because love is always in and of the heart, where God resides, if she does anywhere within us. Thus our primary activity is to ready our hearts for the gentle life, through prayer and song and conversation and creative endeavor. God will do the rest. We will be making decisions from the heart, if we're trying even a little to be God's people, and lots of those decisions will prove to be wrong, which means we will have to make lots more. But, no matter how wrong we are, our purpose, our meaning, our salvation is in the trying, the orientation. By the grace of God we will observe carefully the preparation, the substance and the aftermath of our decisionmaking, and pray for the faith, the strength and the wit to make our decisions increasingly charitable, clever and pleasurable. That's how we try, because we know that's what God wants us to do: Care for the Poor, Take Care of the Planet, Have a Ball.

This trying is the commitment we make. Deciding to live this way is how we can marry life, how we can marry God. It is the undertaking that makes us "a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem in the hand of God." Which are the same thing, crown and diadem. It is certainly not our behavior on this Earth. Our behavior has proved problematic, historically. It has been said that every field in the world is a battlefield. Some are remembered, some long forgotten.

No, we are not crowns in God's diadem because of our behavior, but because of the desire in our hearts to be better. In the minds

of those who have it, this desire is often accompanied by the determination to persevere in the face of seemingly ludicrous odds. We live and love even though we know we will suffer and die. We give and let live, even though we know that others will disagree with our choices, cast us out, even bring violence upon us, and often fail to send us a thank-you note.

This permanent conundrum, this paradoxical pain in the beam is what impresses God enough about us to call us holy. What makes the world turn, what makes the society function, what makes God happy is the desire, the ability and the practice of commitment amongst humanity. Commitment, that is, to care for, nurture, support and listen to one another. Then we are no longer called "Forsaken," but instead begin a new life, in which our name becomes "My Delight Is in Him," "My Delight is in Her," and our life shall be lived as ones "married;" for the Lord delights in those who are married. Just as one beloved person marries another, so shall Creation embrace us, so shall God rejoice over us.

Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing is the title of Professor, Sister Margaret Farley's book. Changing, because she has accepted, as must all humanity accept, that things change. Her wisdom is in illuminating the forgiveness and direction that God offers when we have commitments that do not hold. How to change graciously when commitments are no longer purposeful and wholehearted is a question much in the news this week, as the top group of Anglican leaders disperses, having put us Episcopalians in the theological dog house for accepting what seem like indisputable changes in our knowledge of what God means by charity, self-knowledge, wholeness and peace.

We have prayerfully considered the objections they have, we have discussed them, argued over them, fought about them and

voted on them. We think we are right, and we probably are. But we also will carry forward the certain knowledge that God forgives the wrong, as long as their hearts mean well. Perhaps the luxuries of our standard of living have created just enough space for us to make more godly and compassionate decisions on the subject of interpersonal relationships and their maintainable commitments. But we do well to remember that our ways and our prosperity have been bought with the blood, sweat and tears of many about whom our decisions have been cruel and deadly. There is no high moral ground, even when the other fellow is wrong. Self-righteousness is one luxury we can never afford.