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1.13.18 Homily

Second Ordinary

1 Sam 3:3-10,19; Ps 40:2,4,7-10; 1 Cor 6:13-15,17-20; John 1:35-42

*Elsie Hainz McGrath*

Adina died yesterday afternoon. That was my first news of the day this morning, and it set the stage for today's homily. I don't know Adina. But everybody in St. Louis knows Adina's parents: the Rabbis Susan Talve and Jim Goodman. And today's first reading, with which I have a pretty personal relationship, I am absolutely sure is equally as personal to Susan and Jim.

Last evening, on the Eve of Shabbat which CRC celebrates every Friday evening, the Congregation was honoring another of this city's local heroes, Sister Antona Ebo who, as you know, passed from our presence on 11/11, the Eve of our Sabbath and the day of our Tenth Anniversary celebration. Had I been paying attention, rather than being bogged down in the labor-intensive mess of dismantling all signs of Christmas at my home, I might have been at CRC.

All of which is to say, as we do on a regular basis, that everything is connected: life and death and relationships and intimate calls from the Source of all Being *from* which each and every living entity is birthed and *within* which we also dwell. The mystery of life is that it *was*, it *is*, and it *always* will be.

And so the gospel story repeats the temple story, except that life has fast-forwarded possibly 1,200 years or more, it is in the fullness of the day rather than in the darkness of the night, and the vista is outdoors rather than in. We are called – every living entity, in very specific ways and for very specific reasons – sometimes privately, sometimes publicly, sometimes even by a different name. Simon means “hear, listen,” in Hebrew – which Simon apparently did – while Cephas means “rock” in Aramaic (which translates as Peter in Greek). Antona means “priceless,” in Nordic languages while Adina means “noble, gentle, delicate,” in Hebrew.

And so we look at Paul, who was called Saul before he was called into service while on the road for, ironically, purposes of opposite intent. Seems no one changed Saul's name except Saul, and when we look at the etymology it gives us a fuller picture of who Paul was. Because Saul means “prayed for” in Hebrew, while Paul means “small, humble” in Greek.

Today, Paul is expounding on the human body – a very timely subject for 2018 – and the reason why it is sacred – a seemingly unknown piece of truth in 2018. Paul gives the most beautiful and profound explanation of the human body that has ever been given: “it is a temple of the Holy Spirit within us that we have from God.” *Shekinah*, the shining Presence of God, dwells within – within the very *womb* of the Cosmos and within every life form that dwells therein.

That is why there is no need for an Ark of the Covenant. There is no need for a Noah's Ark, or a Temple in Jerusalem, or a Cathedral in Rome, or a bejeweled monstrosity to hold a perfectly molded “host.” It is also why Christians believe our bodies are eternal, regardless of their earthly decay or even the fires of holocausts, earthquakes, or cremation.

We bear witness to the truth of this throughout the seasons of every year and the seasons of every lifetime. But still we do not see. We *dishonor* life in all its forms, *disrespect* other forms as lesser than our own, and *cling* to a macabre fear of death that defies our professed beliefs. We consider old age ugly and useless, and go to bizarre lengths to deny its existence within ourselves. We look on illness of body, mind, or spirit as some kind of a curse, or at least an undeserved onus that also causes disruptions in our own, more worthy, lives. And we hope that we might be able to rustle up a few dollars extra with which to buy our way out of guilt for doing nothing else to help the less fortunate among us. Including *all* species of life, even the *very* life of the planet upon which we now live.

So let us thank God for this return to our “ordinary time” of life, that time which calls and calls and calls us by name – to *do* more, to *be* more, to know *who* we are and *whose* we are. And let us thank God, that Source of All Life, for the models

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who are set before us every step of the way: for Eli and Samuel, for Jesus, for Peter and Andrew and James and John, for Saul become Paul, for Antono and Susan and Jim, for Adina, and for each other. May each of us and all of us begin and end our days in utter simplicity and humility, believing in hope as we pray, "Speak, O God, for your servant is listening."

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1.20.18 Homily

Third Ordinary

Jon 3:1-5,10; Ps25:4-9; 1 Cor 7:29-32; Mark 1:14-20

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Ah... the story of Jonah and the whale, which we all know and love... possibly the first Bible story we ever heard (or at least remembered), a children's fairy tale. It goes a long way... toward explaining the mess of a world we are living in on this first day of the new government shutdown. The god of Jonah, the god of Ninevah, and of Missouri, and of the United States government and worldwide conservative Christianity **is a very dogmatic god** – a god we made up as we went along in order to make sense of nonsensical things like prejudice and hatred and exploitation and war. *And* the god of the so-called scholars who assembled the books of the Bible, as we have them, as those that are (and I quote) “the inspired word of god.”

So, Jonah has a hallucination that god is telling him to go to Ninevah and be a street preacher, wearing a clapboard sign and hollering a hellfire and brimstone message as he goes. But then he decides that is a really dumb thing to do, so he boards a ship going the wrong way. Which causes the ship untold grief because it has been cursed by this childish god who is now very mad at Jonah, and a storm smashes it to smithereens, and a big whale who is one of god's henchmen swallows Jonah whole and spits him out again on Ninevah's shore. Wow! So Jonah dries off, dons the signboard, and starts walking. “Change your ways NOW or you are doomed forever!”

And it works, because he is clearly a great street preacher and the whole city believes him. They all make a big public show of their repentance, which god loves. So god repents too, doesn't wipe the place off the map. And now Jonah is really sore, having wanted to at the very least see the rubble after all he's gone through to get there. But god massages his ego and slaps him on the back. “Look at how good you are at persuasion, my boy!” and everybody lives happily ever after.

We of course tend to talk about how *primitive* people's beliefs were in those days, how they tended to see god in the same ways as they saw each other, with the same strengths and weaknesses... only magnified, of course. It was a way to make some sense out of life's nonsensical events. *Ingeniously*. They even invented a bad angel in order to take some of the heat off of a pretty vindictive god.

Remember the bad angel? He wanted to *be* god and so was expelled from heaven in order to ruin all of our lives on earth forevermore... by disguising himself as a snake... or a woman... for example, and *seducing* us, *confusing* us into doing such ungodlike things as raping and killing one another. In god's name. Because, after all, we are god's people!

Mark's fish story is a bit more realistic, or at least a bit more humane. To be fair, it surely didn't happen just that way – that these fishermen just up and walked away from their whole life without so much as even a, “Bye, pop, I'm outta here.” Even if they knew the story of Jonah and the whale – and they probably did – they would have known that catching people instead of fish would not support them or their family. They knew that fishing is an iffy business all the way around. One day its good, next day not so much; and percentage-wise, the fish you catch are FAR outnumbered by the fish you *don't* catch! So they were not following this man Jesus in order to live a cushy life and be idolized as street preachers who were of the caliber of Jonah. This was a *different* kind of call.

When Jesus became our role model, those so-called “church fathers” who won the theological debates decided that was because *Jesus WAS* God. And human too, of course. At the same time. Like us. Because we're all made in the image and likeness of God. Right? So maybe that does make God kind of human too, wouldn't it seem? Only... do we ever see God as kind of dog-y? Or weed-y? As I write this, my focus is distracted by a constant parade of amazing birds fluttering past the window, singing as they soar, delighting in the rising temperatures and the sheer joy of life. How very god-like! But don't we tend, *still*, to hold on to our version of the Elijah story that finds God in the “still small voice” but *not* in the earthquake, *not* in the fire? Which is a great “excuse” for never recognizing God in our world. Especially if our ears are plugged up with earpods full of constant noise, as so many are today. And our eyes are forever focused on little bitty telephone screens filled with mindless and heartless tweets.

Like Paul says, “the form of this world is passing away.” We. Are. Killing. It.

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Which doesn't free us from anxieties, if we're paying attention. It also doesn't free us from involvement. Our call to fishing, as members of the human branch of the Family of God, begins with unplugging our lives from Big Brother's eerie manipulation and allowing ourselves the freedom to become **real** – like that role model, the skin horse, from a more contemporary fairy tale, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

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### 2.3.18 Homily

#### Fifth Ordinary

Job 7:1-4,6-7; Ps 147:1-6; 1 Cor 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

*Elsie Hainz McGrath*

Interesting story of the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. This is our only gospel source of Peter's marital status, and it is interesting on many levels that we tend to overlook. Beginning with the mother-in-law living in Peter's home. Or actually beginning with Peter's brother also living in the same home. According to the customs of the times, which the hearers of the times would have known, this was, of course, not Peter's home at all. Everybody lived in the *family household*: the household of Peter and Andrew's father. That Peter's mother-in-law was there means she had come upon hard times indeed; she had no male relatives with whom she could live.

This complicates matters. Peter and Andrew had just agreed to be Jesus' disciples, and now it is discovered that Peter (at least) is abandoning not only a wife (and possibly children), but also a mother-in-law who has no male relative upon whom to depend for her sustenance. No wonder the poor woman has taken to her bed! Maybe she's even lamenting, like poor Job, at the rotten luck foisted upon her through no fault of her own! Maybe, in fact, that is what Jesus heals her of. Not a round of flu or a life-threatening cancer, but a heavy sickness of the heart... a malaise that a couple of aspirin cannot possibly alleviate.

So, Jesus relieves her of this severe ennui, and she gratefully and happily rejoins the human race. And when the neighbors get wind of this, they swarm the household looking for their own respite from the varying degrees of discontent that bog them down and rob them of the joy of living. Jesus was chasing away demons by the dozens.

And becoming bogged down in the process.

Because, in fact, he knew in his heart of hearts that this was not the role he was called to. And when he retreated into an empty space so that he could gather his thoughts and spend himself in prayer, it was again confirmed for him. He had to leave that place. He had to get back on the road. He had to tell his truth to as many people as would listen. He was called to teach, to preach, to pastor and prophesy. He was called to wander, without a permanent roof over his head. The world was his home, and everybody who heard and believed and followed was sister and brother and mother to him.

Even Saul become Paul.

True confession. Much as I find wrong with today's snippet from Paul *as it is presented to us*, when I first became aware of it I adopted it as mine. Because when I first became aware of it, I lived that way. Today I would call it a cop-out, living like a chameleon, never showing my true colors because I wanted desperately to blend in and be liked by everybody. Quite frankly, that was my over-arching goal in life: to be liked by everybody.

Which is an impossibility.

And which, I now believe, it not *really* the message Paul was trying to convey in this letter. In fact, I still very much claim it as mine. Because nowadays I try mightily to live like what I believe Paul was *really* saying – which I believe got *terribly* confused in interpretation. It is all about passion... empathy... sympathy... unity... **truth**. Not *blending* in but *reaching* in... courageously... listening in order to feel like *you* do, *and* like *they* do; and speaking what I am given to speak, without equivocation and without guile.

That requires a bit of assimilation, insofar as getting a real sense for how others act and think and dream and believe, and *never* presuming that they need to *become like us* in order to be who *they* are called to become. But always holding on to our own identity, our own call.

Everyone here does that, at least in one way, simply by virtue of *being here*, and of not hiding that fact from those who don't "get" it or even from those who vehemently condemn it. It is primarily in those *verboten* areas of religion and politics that such courage of person is most public and most needed. Which is *precisely* why most of us were *carefully* taught to *never* bring either of those subjects into family gatherings. To keep the peace, be a chameleon. Swallow your truth. For the sake of... you name it – and every "it" ends in *ism*.

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Let us continue to support one another, and to support all those who valiantly and faithfully stand on the side of truth. Those who, like Jesus, like Paul, like our present-day truth-tellers, follow their call and stand their ground against all odds. For the sake of the many. For the sake of all life. For the sake of the world.

Let us, at the psalmist's suggestion, *sing to the Beloved with thanksgiving. Mingle with the melody of the spheres. Awaken to our inheritance in all the universe. For we belong to heaven, to the stars and galaxies.*

**Shalom**

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