

## *Laity Notes*

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### ***A SUGGESTION RECEIVED***

Shortly after writing the first edition of this column, I received a call from one of our members suggesting that we find ways to reach out from our church to others. The idea was that we add to our vitality by reaching out. Their specific suggestion was to develop a plan for a visit to our local SAMM shelter. On the internet ([www.samm.org](http://www.samm.org)) we find that "SAMMinistries is an interfaith ministry whose mission is to help the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless attain self-sufficiency by offering, with dignity and compassion, shelter, housing and services. We provide volunteers opportunities to be renewed and fulfilled as they serve." For those impatient souls, Robert Martindale is the President and CEO and may be reached at (210) 220-1240. Their website contains much information for the curious. This is a good idea that could be pursued as a church or individually. Many thanks for this suggestion.

### ***FOR THOSE WHO READ***

A mid-westerner by heritage, Kathleen Norris spent her adolescence in Hawaii, and in 1965 enrolled at Bennington College in Vermont. Upon graduating from Bennington, she moved to New York City, where she lived for nearly six years as an art administrator, "hovering on the fringe of the Andy Warhol scene." A child of the 60s, she made a sharp turn in 1974, venturing with her future husband to Lemmon, South Dakota, where they moved into the home of her recently deceased grandmother. "My four grandparents had come to the state during homestead days to work as teachers, doctors, and Methodist ministers." When Norris enrolled in Bennington, Lemmon had a population of 3,400. Ten years after their arrival the population was 1,600. Arriving in time to catch the late 1970s agricultural boom, within a few years they were

witnessing the Great Plains economic crisis of the 1980s.

As the economic crisis set in, Kathleen Norris took another turn, this time back to church after a twenty-year absence. Along this new journey she met her share of those who approach evangelism as if killing snakes. Rather than succumbing to those heavy sticks, she resisted with wit, wisdom, and words. The result is her delightful book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (1998). Returning to the church after such a long truancy, she found it necessary to rebuild her own religious vocabulary, in part by bringing it down to earth. *Amazing Grace* is a report on that process. Her book consists of brief essays, two to six pages in length, on various words of faith, such as "eschatology," "salvation," "Christ," "faith," and the like. For those who wish to read for shorter periods, and would like to be able to begin reading at the beginning, middle or end of a book, *Amazing Grace* is accommodating. You can open this book to any brief chapter and appreciate what she writes without suffering loss for not having read any previous chapter. Her contribution is to explain lofty terms in clear language through explicit behavior. For example, in her chapter on "Heresy/Apostasy," she writes, "Mark 6:30-34 describes Jesus and his disciples trying to get away from people for a rest, but finding that people follow them, needing a word of encouragement; needing to be tended, fed, and cared for. A Presbyterian pastor once reminded me, in an inventive take on this gospel passage, that we 'go to church for other people. Because,' he added, 'someone may need you there.' I stopped doodling on my bulletin and began to pay attention, apostate no longer but fully present." (203-204) Pleasant reading.

For those of you who read *Amazing Grace* and want more, you might examine her earlier works, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993), and *The Cloister Walk* (1996), or her latest effort, *The Virgin of Bennington* (2001). She also has published poetry for those so inclined. Her *Little Girls in Church* might be a good place to start.

In writing about Kathleen Norris, I have perused four of her books that rest on my bookshelf. In so doing, I have been gently reminded by her that we go to church not for what we get out of it, but to worship God. That was a good reminder. I need that from time to time. Am I alone?

## ***USING WHAT WE HAVE***

When setting out in a new direction, we are often tempted by the idea that we “need something else” before we can begin. We are trying to revitalize our church, and if we just had more money, more energetic workers, more committees, or more of something else, then we would be off and sailing. Sometimes that “something else” stands between us and what we presently have, and becomes a stumbling block that draws our attention to what we lack rather than to what we have. We lack many things in our church, but have we taken a careful inventory of what we have?

To begin with we have a church. Our founders did not. Our original congregation met in a school building in 1978 while our church was under construction. At this stage we are a church ahead of our founders. Is there anything we can do with what we have to make it more inviting to ourselves and to those outside our walls? Are there ways that we could spruce up our church, adding something here, subtracting something there, that would make it more pleasing to our eyes? Last year a small miracle was performed on the room where we hold class on Sunday mornings. Is there room for more such miracles?

Next Sunday from the time you get out of your car before church begins until you return to your car after worship, why not look around and ask yourself: “Is there something that could be done to make our house of worship more attractive? Is there something I could do to make that happen?”

## ***REMEMBER THE SABBATH***

Of our many Jewish inheritances, perhaps none impacts our weekly routine so much as the Sabbath. Having created the world in six days, on the seventh God took rest. “And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*.” The Sabbath has indeed been with us a long time. Yet in Genesis we do not find the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, observing the Sabbath, just as they did not strike out against the religion of Canaan. That was left to later generations, beginning with Moses on Mount Sinai. There, in the fourth commandment, God was quite clear: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Holy had the sense of being set apart; set apart and differentiated from all other days of the week. The Sabbath was supposed to be

different. “Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work...” Work six days and rest on the seventh, that is a sharp distinction observable by all. The emphasis is upon time rather than space. We work in space for six days of the week. But on the seventh day, our time is to be used differently. We are not to labor in space, we are to keep that day set apart and different from the other six.

The Sabbath is the day we go to church to worship God. Compare two statements: “I skipped church last week,” and “last week I chose not to worship God.” The first slides by with ease, but the second is more difficult to say. In fact, we probably would find many ways to avoid making that second statement. “I worshiped God at home last week,” or “I worshiped God on the road last week,” or perhaps “I gave God some quiet time last Sunday.” I have missed many Sundays at church, but I have no recollection of ever telling another that “last week I chose not to worship God.” When we think or speak in that fashion, we are standing with those who argue that God has little claim on our life.

How much do we want to water down that claim? We seem to appreciate the idea of a steadfast God. We do not want wavering on that side of the fence. But what of our side of that same fence? How do we feel about the word steadfast when it is applied to our regularity in church attendance? Early each Sunday morning we make a decision about how we will use our time that day. If we prayed to God for guidance, what might His answer be?

## ***ABOUT THIS COLUMN***

As I said in my initial effort last week, I had not given thought to how often I might write. I still have not made that decision, but the mood again struck me this past week and you are reading the result. I changed the title from “Thoughts from Your Lay Leader,” to “Laity Notes.” As I reread the first title it sounded a bit too much like Chairman Mao. If someone has a better idea, please let me know.

## ***COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS***

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