

Lent 5, Year B, 03-25-12
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it produces much fruit." (John 12:20-33)

In 1845 British Rear Admiral Sir John Franklin set sail from England to search for a passage to the Orient that would go from the Atlantic through the Arctic to the Pacific, thereby overcoming the obstacle of the presence of the North American continent. Franklin is remembered because he actually discovered the passage and almost made it through. But he and his entire party died during their exploration; over the next 150 years or so, more than 40 expeditions were made to try and discover why they had all died and how. Officially, Franklin's expedition was done in by scurvy and by the fact that a relatively new invention, tinned meat, that was purchased for the expedition was poorly soldered and leached deadly amounts of lead into the food.

One of the most interesting aspects of this journey was the decision about what to bring along and what to leave behind. Of course, such journeys needed to be carefully prepared for. They expected that the journey would take two to three years. But these are some of the things they carried with them: a twelve-day supply of coal; an organ that played 50 tunes, a 1200-volume library, heavy china place settings for the men, cut glass goblets, heavy sterling silver flatware. The flatware was engraved with the initials and the family crest of each of the officers.

For over twenty years, search parties found well-preserved bodies and skeletons in the frozen Arctic. After their ship was frozen into the ice for a winter, the supplies were running low and some of the men evidently decided to walk for help. This was why their bodies were found scattered over a wide area. Some spent a winter or more with Inuit people but died the next season as they tried to walk out to find some semblance of European civilization. There is some evidence that, as they decided to set out from the ship to walk for help across the Arctic, they took a lifeboat and put in it the organ, some books, some china, and some of the flatware and tried to drag it across the ice with them.

We will probably never know what really happened but I can't help but wonder what would have happened if they had concentrated on helping each other survive rather than on taking everything but the kitchen sink with them.

It's amazing how much we think we need in order to survive, isn't it? I always wondered why Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Howell, III happened to have all those clothes with them for just a three-hour tour. But then I think of the inevitable stories on our local TV news

stations when a hurricane is approaching the area; intrepid reporters are down at the Gulf, filming people pack up their belongings, the picture albums, the rocking chair, their grandmother's silver, flat screen TVs - everything they can squeeze into the nooks and crannies of the family SUV.

Speaking of helping each other really survive, I'm sure you all are aware of the recent tornadoes across the Midwest that wiped out an entire town in Indiana. While most of us have been thrilled over how almost the whole country skipped winter and jumped right into spring, the storms that often accompany spring have done a lot of damage and killed a lot of people, many in that little town.

I was struck by many of the interviews conducted by newscasters with some of the survivors. Some were students who had helped move younger kids to safety while the school was being blown away. Parents talked about covering their children with their own bodies to help protect them from the violent winds. Others helped find people in the wreckage after the storms were gone. None of them called themselves heroes. None of them called themselves saviors. They just did what they needed to do.

Many of the people remarked that even though everything they had was gone, it was the people in their lives who were important, not their house or the belongings in them. Standing amid the houses that now looked like a bunch of pickup sticks dropped from the sky, almost everyone said that they could replace 'things', but not their families or friends or neighbors or classmates.

The difference between the explorers and the folks in Indiana lies in their ability to be transformed - to be changed -- to realize that it is not the things that we own (and especially not how many things we own) that are important, but the people in our lives who are important. And I don't mean 'the people in our lives' like a sappy greeting card. I mean family, even if we don't get along, or we don't like each other very much; I mean people we meet who are in need - in need of comfort, in need of dignity, in need of being loved; I mean people we will probably never meet, who are in need of freedom, in need of empowerment, in need of hope.

If we allow ourselves to be transformed, then our example to others allows them to be transformed, and so on and so forth. It's a sort of 'pay-it-forward' idea - and our model for doing it is Christ Jesus: "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it produces much fruit." The writer of John's gospel puts these words in the mouth of the one who did that literally - Jesus, the grain of wheat, died -- but the fruit, the transformation -- the result -- was and is a community of people who have been transformed, who are being transformed, by the love of God. And that community, through its transformation, its dying to the old way, bears the fruit of an

ever larger community that will spread that light, that hope, that love to all the ends of the earth.

In these final days of Lent, let us concentrate, not on how we transform ourselves in the all-about-me world - that is, using Lent as our reason for not smoking or drinking or cussing or eating too much (almost all of those being things that I have done). But let us work on how we can transform ourselves to produce a community that cares for, that respects, that brings dignity to, that empowers - a community that loves - those who are the least and the lost.

If we can do that, what an Easter that will be! AMEN.