

GET BUSY DOING GOOD

On this day in the year 342 a man by the name of Nicholas died. For over a thousand years the church has been remembering Nicholas on this day. I would like to talk about him today because he is such a good example of doing what the Bible readings for today urge us to do. The Bible readings urge us to repent, straighten out our lives, and produce a harvest of righteousness.

Nicholas was born in what is now Turkey and grew up to become the bishop of Myra. Legends tell of his love for children. He was known as a friend and protector of those in trouble. And stories abound of his kindness and his generosity and gift-giving.

The most famous story about Nicholas tells how he helped three unfortunate sisters who wanted to get married, but they had no dowries because their father was very poor and could not raise the money. According to the custom of that day, without dowries, they could not marry.

Bishop Nicholas heard of their plight and wanted to help. And since he did not like to give money directly, he thought of a way to give it anonymously. When the first daughter was ready to marry, the good bishop tossed a bag of gold into the house at night. Later, when the second daughter was ready to marry, she too received a mysterious bag of gold. When the third daughter prepared to marry, the father was determined to find out who had been so generous. So he kept watch.

The legend is that Saint Nicholas climbed up on the roof and dropped the third bag of gold down the chimney where it landed in a stocking that was hung there to dry. When the father saw what had happened, Nicholas begged him to keep the secret, but, of course, the news got out. From then on, whenever anyone received an unexpected gift, they thanked Nicholas.

Nicholas became known all over for his generosity. Stories about Nicholas spread to Italy, to Russia, and even to the Laplands - the land where the people with the reindeer sleighs live. Thousands of churches are named after him. St. Nicholas became associated with Christmas. Here in the United States, some of our Christmas customs can be traced back to Nicholas, such as giving gifts, hanging Christmas stockings filled with gifts, and decorating our Christmas trees with gold balls, a reminder of the sacks of gold Nicholas delivered to the three sisters.

Saint Paul wrote a letter of encouragement to the Christians living in Philippi. He said to them, "I pray that your love will keep on growing and that you will fully know and understand how to make the right choices. Then you will still be pure and innocent when Christ returns. And until that day, Jesus Christ will keep you busy doing good deeds that bring glory and praise to God."

Keep busy doing good deeds - that's what Nicholas did. And that's what God wants us to do as well.

This congregation has a rich tradition of helping people in need. I'm afraid, though, that in the past couple of years we have let up. We haven't been as passionate about feeding the hungry and helping the poor and sharing the Gospel with people around the globe. We have been too focused inward, on ourselves. It is time that we get busy doing good deeds. It is time to regain a passion for helping others.

It is easy to talk about helping others, but we don't always follow through with good deeds. In the cathedral of Lubeck, Germany, there is an inscription which says:

Thus speaketh Christ, our Lord, to us:
Ye call me Master, and obey me not;
Ye call me Light, and see me not;
Ye call me Way, and walk me not;
Ye call me Life, and desire me not;
Ye call me Wise, and follow me not;
Ye call me Fair, and love me not;
Ye call me Rich, and ask me not;
Ye call me Eternal, and seek me not;

Ye call me Gracious, and trust me not;
Ye call me Noble, and serve me not;
Ye call me Mighty, and honor me not;
Ye call me Just, and fear me not;
If I condemn you, blame me not.

God does not want to condemn us. God has a plan to save us! God's plan involved John the Baptist whose job was to prepare people for God's salvation. John called people to repent of their sins, to straighten out their lives, and live for God.

John, of course, was getting people ready for Jesus. In a few weeks we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. One of the Bible readings for Christmas comes from the book of Titus which says that Jesus gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Jesus gave himself for us! Nicholas was generous and gave gifts to others because he knew that Jesus had given himself for him. Should we not do the same? Jesus has given so much to us! Jesus gave himself for us! He went to the cross, sacrificed his life for us. Jesus forgives us and gives us eternal life with God. How can we not be generous and give gifts to others?

One way we can do that is through our financial support of the church. Today we have the opportunity to offer our estimates of giving for 2010. May we follow the example of Nicholas with generous giving - and let's do so because Jesus gave himself for us!

I don't think it is a coincidence that Saint Nicholas is associated with Christmas. Christmas is a time for giving and sharing with others. Nicholas is a good example of that. May we also be people who are generous in giving to others.

