

“Imagine”

A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas

7 December 2008

The Feast of St. Nicholas (transferred)

Isaiah 11:1-10 + Psalm 78:3-7 + 1 John 4:7-14 + Mark 10:13-16

The legends and stories of Nicholas come from a deep place in the human psyche, a place where the unlikely and improbable become commonplace, and the wonderfully fantastic makes perfect sense. But what I like most about them is that they can be so over-the-top they make historians wince -- and children squeal with delight.

They lend themselves to various retellings – as you’ll hear in a moment – but always they invite us into the space of Nicholas, who is, in the words of my favorite commentator, Gertrud Mueller Nelson, “the manifestation of a great inner truth.”

So...take a deep breath... relax... and imagine yourself in a time long ago, say around 325 A.D., and in a place far away from where you are sitting just now, say in Demre, Turkey, which in 325 was known as Myra.

It’s a glorious summer day, with a bright blue sky and a warm yellow sun shining behind and through gigantic, puffy-white cumulus clouds. The temperature is in the 70s; indeed, it’s one of those days that feel like heaven come down to earth. You are in a medium-sized village. It’s mid-day, and the streets are full of people and bustle.

Now imagine yourself as someone different than who you are. In our story, you have several choices. You can imagine yourself as a little child. The story that has come down to us says *boy*, but that's patriarchy for you. Boy or girl doesn't matter. You choose. Or, instead, you can imagine yourself as Sarah, the Queen of Sausages, or Saul, her husband.

If you're feeling rascally, you can even imagine yourself as the devil. And, if you are feeling saintly, imagine yourself as Nicholas. Nah, on second thought, you can't be Nicholas. I'm going to grab that role to tell the story. (*Don Nicholas costume – robe, mitre, crozier*)

Of course, flights of the imagination are easy for some and harder for others, but that's life. Just try your best.

As Nicholas: Now some of you may remember the Council of Nicea and the legends that say what a big part I played in it. Believe you me, the legends don't tell the half of it! That doggone heretic Arius was a complete pain in the butt. He'd been running all around telling people Jesus was *created* by the Father and that meant he was *less* than God the Father. What poppycock! Can you believe the stuff priests and bishops say these days?

Didn't he ever bother to read John's gospel? *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* Plain as day, don't you think? Well, I sure gave him a piece of my mind -- and so did some of the other bishops.

There's lots more I could tell you about Arius and the Council, and I will sometime, but right now I want to tell you what happened when I got back from Nicea. It's about Sarah the sausage maker, and what happens when making money becomes more important than making people happy.

While I was away, things were good in the Diocese. The persecutions had ended and we Christians were moving into the mainstream of society, entering professions and becoming public citizens in ways we hadn't dared before. Sarah was a great example.

A clever lass, she had worked as an apprentice for several years to Joe the butcher. Quite the brainy one, Sarah realized there had to be a better, and faster, way to make sausage. So every night, after work, she stayed up well past midnight tinkering around in her basement trying to build the world's best sausage maker ever.

This went on for about two years until one day she woke up her husband from a sound sleep to announce, "Saul, I've done it!" Indeed she had. Sarah's new sausage maker was revolutionary. All you had to do was stuff a pig in one end, turn the crank, and out the other end would come the most fabulous tasting sausage you ever tasted.

Best of all, it saved so much time that Sarah could buy two dozen pigs a day and have them all sausaged out in time for the lunch rush. Now, she only had to work half a day and she could make twice the money she used to make working the whole day long.

Sarah was always generous to the church. Monsignor wrote me while I was away to tell me Sarah had doubled her pledge and also donated three new stained glass windows. I very much looked forward to my return so I could thank Sarah personally – and ask her to donate 10,000 mosquito nets to our Nets 4 Life campaign. That’s a lot of bacon, but she was selling lots of sausage.

Turns out I wasn’t the only one dreaming about how to spend Sarah’s new-found dough. Saul, it turned out, was more ambitious than Sarah, and -- I later learned -- one afternoon after she and Saul had sold all their sausage for the day, he was sitting outside under the apple tree when who should come along but my old friend the devil.

“Saul,” he said in his sweetest, most understanding voice, “just imagine all the great stuff you could buy if Sarah would stop giving away all her money and put in a full day’s work. Why, she’s got a gold mine in that sausage maker of hers, but you’re not living much better than you were before she invented it.”

“You’re right. We’re still living in the same little house we bought when we got married.”

“Why, I’ll bet you could afford one of those nice new houses they’re building overlooking the sea if Sarah would work even a couple of hours more a day. The demand for her sausages is amazing.”

Saul was not the kind of person who needed a lot of help figuring out ways to spend money, but if he had been, the devil was the best – or worst, depending on how you look at it -- helper he could have asked for.

Soon, he had Saul completely convinced that Saul and the Queen of Sausage were entitled to the very best of everything, and all they had to do to get it was cut back on their pledge to the church and buy 36 pigs a day instead of 24. And they could still stop work by 3.

It wasn't easy, for Sarah was happy with her new invention and new life, but Saul devilishly cajoled and sweet-talked her until she finally agreed.

Well, that would have been bad enough, but just before I left Nicea to return home to Myra, the harvest failed and famine began to creep into the land. Many people began to be hungry, and even the livestock. So when I arrived home, I thought a visit to Sarah might be a good thing. She was a creative woman, and I thought maybe she'd donate some sausage or have some good ideas about how to make what little food we had left go farther.

When I got to her shop, the people were lined up, ready to buy her sausage sandwiches. But there was trouble. She had bought 36 pigs that morning, just as the devil had suggested, but the famine was spreading and they were not nearly as fat as they used to be.

This meant she couldn't make as much sausage. It was 11 in the morning and she'd already run out. Saul was apoplectic. "What are you going to do?" he said to Sarah. "We've got a mortgage payment to meet and a business to run. We've got to get some plump little pigs."

"But, dear," she replied, "Those were the last pigs – the only pigs – left. I can't get any plump pigs. In fact, I can't get any more pigs at all."

Saul was furious. “I don’t want any excuses. Go shoot a moose if you have to. We need fresh meat. We’ve got bills to pay, expenses to meet.”

That’s when I left. I figured a Queen in a tizzy and her consort in a dither wouldn’t be much help to a bishop trying to care for his people. Maybe tomorrow things will be different.

When I returned the next morning, the line was long, the sausage machine was humming, and Saul, who was running it, had a big smile on his face. Much better, I thought. But something seemed peculiar. Sarah usually runs the machine while Saul works the counter and serves the customers. I went around back and spotted her off in a corner. But she wouldn’t look at me and, when I called her name, she looked away.

Something’s very wrong here, I realized, and I rushed back into the shop. Saul was still smiling, but I saw now that it was a greedy, maniacal smile. His eyes were flashing like dollar signs as he furiously turned the crank of Sarah’s fabulous sausage machine.

“Stop at once,” I cried, but he only turned the handle more frantically.

“Then I’ll have to stop you myself,” I shouted. “Your wife may be the Queen of Sausage, but you’re up to some royal shenanigans.”

Pushing him aside – I know that’s not very bishoply, but even Jesus shoved the money-lenders in the Temple – pushing him aside, I grabbed the handle and quickly cranked it in reverse. I’m not sure why I did this, but after a few minutes, out popped a little child, and so I kept cranking until out popped a second and then a third. They looked dazed and confused, but otherwise unharmed.

“Heavens, dear children! Who has done this to you?”

“We were off in the field playing,” said the smallest of the three, “when a man came along and asked if we’d like to try some of his wife’s sausage. We hadn’t eaten anything since the day before yesterday, so we agreed.”

“And then he brought us here,” said one of the other children, “tied us up, and fed us into that horrible machine.”

“That’s the last thing we remember,” said the third.

I’ve done many things as a bishop and I’ve tried to help many people, but nothing I’ve ever done made me as happy as what I did that day. As for Saul and Sarah, they were arrested and they’ll spend the rest of their lives in prison.

And the moral of the story? When others are suffering and hungry, help feed them instead of trying to grab more and more for yourself.