

August 21, 2011

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 12:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

I'm baaaaack!

First, if you will indulge me a moment, I want to say thank you so much for your generosity in allowing me to take a sabbatical this summer. As I said to the vestry a few nights ago, my colleagues tell me that they barely noticed I was gone, so healthy and stable is this place. And while I have mixed feelings about my absence being but a blip on the All Saints' screen, I am extremely grateful to have had that time to rest and renew myself, to travel with my family, to rekindle old beloved hobbies. Thank you.

The focus of my sabbatical project, as many of you know, was the hands of Episcopalians in different places around the country. I photographed hands accepting Eucharist in Bristol, New York and Abingdon and Jacksonville, in Atlanta, San Francisco and St. Augustine and Norfolk. My family and I traveled a lot and had some great adventures, and all the while, I was visiting churches, photographing hands and asking people "What is the most important thing you do with your hands?"

I loved doing it. I loved every interview. I loved talking with you, interviewing you, photographing you. By "you" of course I mean the beloved people of God. I was pleasantly surprised to meet you far and wide, easy to find in country and city, open and honest and willing to talk about being the Body.

The answers were at the same time mundane and astounding.

"I volunteer at a chemo clinic."

"I'm a teacher."

"I pray."

"I plant."

"I hold."

The things that people told me they do were not world-changing by themselves. These were regular, normal, everyday extraordinary people just like y'all. And, like y'all, they were out there, in the world, doing what needed to be done with hands just like mine and yours. Working on the kingdom. Working as the Body. Our hands are everywhere!

A quote by St. Teresa of Avila organized my theology on this:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth,

yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.

Hands are, of course, are a metaphor for all that we do to make level the way for the Kingdom of God. Hands without arms could be awkward, our legs have feet and toes working together to get us there. Each component relies of the other parts to work as a functioning whole.

In a strange turn of events that involved a playground ball, a backyard patio and a bit of bravado, a friend of mine broke both his wrists this summer. As he got past the initial trauma of ambulance and emergency room, the pain in his arms turned to frustration at every turn. There were the obvious limitations: no picking up the kids, no throwing balls, or swimming in the pool. But then there were the unexpected ones: he couldn't shave, drive, button his shirt or type on his Blackberry. Bottle openers, pens, scissors... all kinds of everyday items became useless between his casts. He is healed now, casts off, physical therapy underway, but I am sure he has a new-found respect for that complex little conglomeration of bones between hand and forearm. It all works together. It is all necessary.

There were a few simple realizations for me this summer as I traveled about, making friends of strangers, photographing and interviewing.

The first is that we are out there, doing it. This should be no surprise to me. I'm of hearty All Saints' stock. Of course we're out there doing it. But, as I said earlier, it was good to be reminded that, despite the gloomy press on the state of Christianity in the world, we are out there doing it. We are taking our hands, heads, shoulders, knees and toes and doing what we need to do to make each little corner of the world a better place and to make sure that God is seen and heard. We are doing it by ourselves and in groups, in love and with faith and despite everything that tells us otherwise. My friends, the church is alive and well, even outside these doors.

The second realization is this: Our reading from Romans and the exhortation from St. Teresa are asking us to identify our gifts, then get out and do it. This morning's reading reminds us that we all have particular gifts, that we must discern those gifts, each one of us special, then use them as best we can to usher in the kingdom of God. But-- and perhaps more importantly—we must use our gifts together to make this whole thing work.

A church needs a minister, right? (Come on, make me feel better, just for a minute, right?) But a priest is just a lonely loudmouth in an empty room without a congregation. And priest and congregation together will run around like headless chickens without a smart governing body like our own talented vestry. We also need teachers for our children to make sure the church can continue. We need visitors for our members who are homebound lest we lose valued voices. We need those we can rely on to pray without ceasing to keep our center secure.

We need people to count our pledges and make sure the money is used wisely to the glory of God. We need readers so we can hear scripture and those who maintain and beautify our spaces to make sure we have somewhere to be together. We need all of these and more to make it work. No part is dispensable. No part is unnecessary.

In our reading from Romans this morning, much of what I learned on my sabbatical is reflected right back to me: We are each uniquely gifted, we each are loved and necessary, but we are fully reliant on each other to make this thing happen.

And when we are doing just that-- looking to one another to complete the whole, recognizing the blessedly diverse gifts we each bring to the table with sober judgment and a good measure of faith-- we are transformed. We are discerning the will of God by working together, praying together, living together and loving one another. And we are transformed. And we transform the world around us by proximity.

Finally, friends, I want you to hear me say this loud and clear: no one in this room is exempt from the implications of this reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. There is not one single person in this room who would not change this community for the better by bringing his or her gifts to bear. And there is not one person who would not be changed by doing so. You are gifted. You are necessary. The Body of Christ needs you and you, in turn, need the Body.

This is your invitation to transform and be transformed.