

August 28, 2011

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 12:19-21; Matthew 16: (13-20), 21-28

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Celebration of Ministries

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” St. Paul’s instructions to the Christians in Rome are also good reminders for us as we lift up and celebrate the multiplicity of ministries or areas of service that we enjoy in our parish. What we say about every single one of these ministries is that we want them to be ‘relationship based’. That can sound pretty pie-in-the-sky, or perhaps sound like ‘corporate speak’ but it is a way of remembering that in the end it is the giving of ourselves in love for others after the model and pattern of Jesus that is truly important. Not every one of these ministries is about making lifelong friends. Sometimes we simply have a job to do. But they are all about offering ourselves in service to others in one way or another.

A few years ago a friend of mine who has moved away from Atlanta became really excited by the relationship he was forming with a family of our refugee friends. One Saturday he spent the day with a handful of other of you who serve in that ministry of friendship. You went and collected an apartment’s worth of furniture from various places and agencies and stores around Atlanta, and moved this family into new and fully furnished place to live. It was a great day and it ended with one *very* tired and happy family and some tired but satisfied volunteers who ministered to people who need American friends above all as they navigate life as strangers in a strange land. My friend, with great excitement proposed that we could establish a warehouse and collect furniture from all over Atlanta and make sure that every refugee who was establishing a home here would have good quality furniture as they started out. I had to say to him that it was a wonderful idea and that I hoped that someone would take on that ministry, but that it wasn’t right for us. I pointed out that his sense of accomplishment and enjoyment of the day was not, first and foremost, about the furniture. It was about the relationships: friendship with a refugee family and mutual accomplishment alongside other members of All Saints’, most of whom he did not already know.

When all is said and done, our ministries are about giving of ourselves in love. A small group of people are thrown together on an altar guild team and over time—over years even—conversation upon conversation, while polishing silver or ironing fair linens for the altar, deep and lasting friendships are made and built and sustained. We may not get to know every family that comes to shop at Threads, but everyone who gives of themselves through that work has a story of some encounter, some exchange that has changed the way they look at the world, the poor, themselves as they sought to “outdo each other in showing honor.”

Before we get hurt from listening to St. Paul and patting ourselves on the back however, we should also bear in mind what St. Mathew has to say to us about ministry. You might recall that last week we heard Jesus ask the disciples who they thought he was. Peter proclaimed him the Messiah and Jesus responded first by telling Peter that he is to be the rock on which the church is built, giving him the keys to the kingdom and the power to bind and unbind things on earth and in heaven; and finally he tells the disciples that they should not tell anyone that he is the Messiah. The story picks up with today's assigned reading. "From that time on, Jesus began to *show* his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." Peter responds immediately by saying that it must not be so and Jesus calls him a 'stumbling block'—something that will sabotage Jesus' mission and ministry. Jesus calls him Satan, recalling the last temptation in the wilderness when Jesus rejected the possibility of ruing over the whole world offered by the devil.¹ In the space of a few short sentences, Peter has gone from being praised as the rock on which the church will be built to being a satanic stumbling block which will sabotage the purposes of God. From rock to block. From faith-man to Satan.

So it can be for any one of us as we engage in these ministries if we begin to find ourselves becoming protective of something, fearful of loss of our ability to shape the vision, less able to give ourselves in love and more likely to say that we "aren't getting anything out of whatever it is we do", when we blame what we perceive and judge to be the deficiencies of others for our dissatisfaction: "all those people down there are hypocrites or racist or rich or stupid." We can turn a beautiful act of service into an attitude that sabotages the ministry without even knowing that we are doing it. Perhaps what we imagine to be caring is experienced by the objects of our concern as self-serving. Perhaps when we perceive that someone is nervous when they are with us and we are very different from them in some way, we might find ourselves calling them 'weak' rather than looking at *our own* role and the consequence of our own presence in the exchange. If you have ever thought of some of the Men of Hope—graduates of the Covenant Community, our ministry for formerly homeless drug addicted men who frequently help out around our campus—if you have ever found yourself thinking that this one or that one is 'standoffish' or 'surlly' or 'rude' then you know how easy it is to go from rock to block in an instant.

If we want to work on this and if anything is spiritual work, then self giving love is spiritual work—If we want to work on the relationships at the heart of our ministries then we have to recognize that work includes learning to recognize difference, understand the consequences of difference (rather than assuming that you already know what they are) and perhaps even coming to appreciate those who differ from us on their own terms (which of course does not mean that they get to define us any more than we get to define them). When we get better at recognizing, understanding and even appreciating difference then we are on the way to being both more free from our own anxieties and more genuinely hospitable to those we serve and those with whom we serve. I'm not going to go into this in any detail now except to say that in the months

¹ Ulrich Luz. *Matthew 8-20* (Augsburg Fortress, 2001) p.382

and years to come we will find additional ways to be conscious about growing in faith as we engage God and our neighbors, as we carry out our ministries. The key to the Kingdom that Jesus gave Peter was, I believe, the secret of self-giving love. When we love patiently and over the long haul we can see the things that bind us falling away. And just as easily we can fail to bind the very people we serve. As Jesus puts it: “if you want to become my followers, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” Remember he not only taught us the way, but *showed* us that real freedom is founded in self-giving love, and that when we live with all the integrity we can muster, then we are free. “Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

As ever we will take a time of silence in which to continue our response to the good news that it is through engaging God and neighbor—really engaging including looking at our own role in these relationships—that we know good news. Let us pray...