

August 31, 2008

**Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A** (Romans 12.9-21)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

*The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector*

Mmmmm... can you smell it? The smell of newly-sharpened pencils is in the air!

While it is hardly appropriate to call the weather the last few days "fall" (it was 90 degrees as we trekked to the Aquarium on Friday), truth is, we are sliding into the season of start-ups.

The elementary teachers have stapled up the orange and red and gold leaf cut-outs on the bulletin boards. The college campuses have rolled out the welcome mats for frightened freshmen. And the Horseshoe Room across the way in Egleston Hall is full of foam-core placards in various states of repair, at the ready for next week's Celebration of Ministries Sunday.

It is taboo around here to call what we are doing in this church in the next couple of weeks "start up". After all, unlike the elementary schools and college campuses, we never closed down (believe me!). We have had programming, worship, ministry and fellowship all summer long.

So no, we're not starting up next week, we're celebrating what has been happening here all summer, all decade, for the last century and will continue to happen.

But regardless of how we couch it, it feels like start up time. Any way we spin it, there is a feeling of returning this time of year, perhaps a feeling that it is finally the right time to sign up, to join in or to choose between several of our amazing programs. Culture brings sense of newness to this time of year, and a sense of possibility in the months that lay before us. New programs are happening, old ones are recommitting.

We're continuing to come together as a community, that's not new, but there's a freshness and promise blowing in with the cooler air... or at least the suggestion of cooler air to come... that reminds us that we aren't just any community, we are the Body of Christ.

In last week's reading, the passage just prior to this one, Paul explains to those new to the faith about the body of Christ and its many members. In some ways it is a shame that that passage is separated from this one by a whole week in our lectionary.

Paul says:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

And he lifts many different gifts that members bring to the whole. That is how, according to Paul, a community is supposed to work. Together, not alone. Then, according to Paul, once we've figured out that we have to do it together as a body with many parts, he gives us this morning's list of what in the world we're supposed to do together.

Our reading from Romans this morning is an impressive list of what it means to be a community of this sort. Paul is writing to the new church in Rome to remind them how to act, who to be, what face to show the world. Paul is reminding them that this community is something different, something that requires vigilance and commitment. This community throws out the old rules and presents the world with some thing new and unexpected.

It is a hard list, and I find it a frustrating and daunting read if I think of doing it all alone.

Let love be genuine  
Hate evil,  
No lagging,  
Serve the lord,  
Rejoice  
Contribute  
Bless those who persecute you  
Live peaceably

And those are just the highlights.

Sure, I think that ideally we would all live by those rules as individuals. But if we did that, chances are pretty good we'd have a world full of Messiahs, holy and blameless, an unlikely situation, although a lovely dream.

Paul isn't speaking to the individual here. He is speaking to a church, the church in Rome in the first century. And he's speaking to our church here, too. These are community instructions, instructions that assume the individuals will fall short from time to time, that some will be better at parts of the list than others.

Community means we bring it all to the table then sort it out, our gifts as well as our common responsibilities, lifting up those who lag, giving extra for those who can't give as much, calming those who urge to fight, inspiring those who have lost their zeal.

But being in community does not get the individual off the hook, we're all responsible, but it *does* mean that we don't have to go it alone, that we don't each have to be the Messiah.

We work hard on being the Body here. We work hard on that difficult list of Paul's. With every meeting, gathering, worship and prayer, we are doing this work.

Lagging in zeal? Spend a Saturday morning with the flower guild.  
Looking to rejoice in hope? Come eat a meal with the men of Covenant Community.  
Extend some hospitality to strangers: Join the Sunday greeters guild. Persevere in prayer with our e-care ministry or contribute to the needs of the saints on the annual canvass team.

Need to associate with the lowly? Join our weekly clergy meeting. Just kidding.

So no, it isn't startup or homecoming Sunday. This isn't the time of year to come back to church. The church isn't reopening after a long summer vacation. But is the time to remind ourselves what we're here to do, recommit ourselves to the Body then get about the work of it. So as the banners march through here next week, as you swell with pride over the work of this place, this good and holy place, I challenge you to examine your understanding and commitment to the work of Christ in the world as exhibited in this parish. Find your place here. Live, serve, learn here, but do it together, as a body, for the love of Christ and for the world.