

August 2, 2009

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:24-35

All Saint's Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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We have come to the point in the year marked by numerous transitions. Some of us have already come home from whatever vacation there was for us this year. We are living through the sales tax holiday weekend when you can stock up for the school year. The long-range planning effort of the Vestry has given us all a survey through which to have input into how we will approach the time ahead.

Even I have observed an important transitional moment. Just three days ago I observed a significant birthday, the one that makes me officially a retired person. I would just love to share with you my favorite birthday card, one I received from my good friends Allison and Harry Pritchett, but I am afraid it contains an expletive which must be deleted. Turning sixty-five has many life consequences to contemplate among which is the sobering reality that I will officially no longer be pre-maturely grey. Transitions can be really challenging. Discerning the way is always right before us.

In John's recollection this morning we read of one of those challenges. Jesus has just come to one boat load of disciples walking on the water while the crowd have rushed around the lake to Capernaum where he meets them. Polite little questions begin the conversation before Jesus calls them on it, their focus on the tangible and the food for the body. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life," he tells them. (Jn. 6:27) And they reply with one of those really important questions, the kind any one trying to teach would just love to have the class ask: "What must we do to perform the works of God?" (Jn. 6:28) How can we get this right?

Think of the potential answers. How can we understand the works of God? Can we enumerate or define them? Can we do them better by reapportioning our resources, or even increasing them? Is there a bail-out possible in the kingdom of God? Where could we just "Drill, baby, drill" or jump-start things with a grant? Or is there any way to obliterate the opposition? Or simply organize ourselves better? What tangible measurement instruments are there for evaluating our performance on the works of God?

But just asking the question reveals our perception of the need to change, to grow, to become equipped for the task.

It is one of the central points of today's familiar Epistle reading from Ephesians. The Pauline author lays this out profoundly: "I ...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." (4:1) He goes on to recognize the diversity of God's calling, noting "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." (4:7) The author enumerates five foundational gifts—some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers—and notes their specific purpose: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." (4:12)

Three important words, technical terms for the life to which we are called: equip, saints, ministry. Let me take them in reverse order.

Ministry. The most important thing to remember about this word is that before it is a noun, a title or a job description, it is a verb, it is something we do. And I believe the best definition is that ministry is servanthood. To minister is to focus on the one being served so that the ignorant learn, the hungry are fed, the lonely are connected, the hurting are comforted and heal, that at the heart of it all is on-going reconciliation. And it is not just the person before us but the one present in them. Will you seek and *serve* Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Saints. Such a common word that we need to remember that this is not just a status or seal of approval. I am struck by the news images of each Sunday's appearance and message by the Bishop of Rome in Vatican Square before throngs of pilgrims from various parts of the world with their banners and chants in what strikes me as a pep-rally in favor of their local hero or heroine whom they would love to have declared a saint. Contrast this with the simple usage of the term in the scriptures, : saints are the ones who choose to be available to God for God's purposes. Consider all those who choose to do this as musicians, teachers, chefs, financial experts, organizers, helpful listeners, ushers, parents, home builders, decent neighbors, caring colleagues, fill in the blank. It is not the "holy ones;" it is the ones willing to become holy. And here at All Saint's, that's *all* of us! My favorite little definition of a disciple is that it is the one who lives the life the teacher lives, a transformation underway and devoutly to be desired. The call is not to do the work of the church but to *be* the church of all saints.

Equip. This is not just a matter of whether you've got it or not. It is one of those Greek New Testament technical terms with three usages. First it means *to mend or restore*. We are not as equipped to serve if we are broken, in body, mind or spirit. First we need to be brought back into proper alignment, to find a supply for what is lacking. In this day and age we no longer can assume that people who join us for the first time are anything but hurting: physically, occupationally, inter-personally, emotionally, intellectually. People do not just happen to go to church. One enters into more service as one enters into more wholeness.

Second, to equip means *to establish or lay foundations*. This includes our grounding in the Word of God, both the text of the Scriptures and the Incarnate Word to which they witness and lead us. For we Anglicans it means to embrace the authority of Scripture, tradition and reason. It is to focus on the model, the incarnate life of Godself as the basis for the life we live. Hymn 518, *Westminster Abbey*, says it so well:

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone,

Chosen of the Lord, and precious, building all the Church in one;

Holy Zion's help forever, and her confidence alone.

Third, besides mend and restore and lay foundations, this term equip finally means *to prepare or train*. This includes growth in understanding the gift of the Spirit and the Spirit's gifts. It means growth in our own personal spiritual lives through which we discern what God would have us do. It means specialized training, anything from the comprehensive efforts of

Education for Ministry down to the specifics of how to make a stewardship call or be a caring person in your very own office or neighborhood.

And it is not about achieving the status of one now equipped; it is about the process of continually being equipped, of the joy of coming into the on-going transformation that marks the life in Christ. Ephesians pulls no punches about the rough waters that such a life may encounter: “We must no longer be Children,” the author warns, “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” (4:14) The call is to a radical kind of life expressed in the simplest of terms: “But speaking the truth in love,” we read, “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” (4:15)

Speaking the truth in love. Think of all the ways we can convey the truth. We can speak the truth in self-defense. We can speak the truth in vindication. We can speak the truth in accusation. We can speak the truth in attack. We can speak the truth in order to put someone down, to get ahead ourselves, to come out the winners. We could point out the reality in a way that may be totally true though not necessarily helpful. Imagine if we, for instance, called something “stupid”. We might have to have a beer out in the backyard with the “stupid” people.

In calling us to speak the truth in love the Greek text uses that powerful word *agape*. That is the love marked by the giving of oneself with no expectation of return. It is finding a way and a time to enter the conversation, to explore the complicities of the participants, of allowing the truth to emerge and respect to come present. It is not about winning, triumph or ‘being right.’ It is about change. It is about growth. One of the only memorable things I ever heard in a pastoral ministry course in seminary was a pocket definition of the term *pastor*. A pastor is someone who goes around giving people ladders with which to climb down from the lofty positions they have taken.

In our individual time seeking the One who is risen, emptying ourselves so that we can be quiet enough to hear, accepting the talents, gifts and roles before us, let us seek to speak the truth in love, just as our Lord addresses us.

Who knows. Even in the most significant life transitions speaking the truth in love may be an even greater image of wisdom than grey hair. It could be a sign that we are performing the works of God.