

Pentecost 17 (b) 10/06/2019

Almighty God, help us to reach beyond ourselves to love others and to love with courage, resolve and purpose; in the name of the One filled with love. Amen.

A man came to the Pearly Gates and asked Saint Peter for admission. "On what basis?" Saint Peter asked.

"Well," said the man, "I worked most recently in the world of financial management, and I labored hard to make even **that** realm a place where God's will was done."

"Yes," replied Saint Peter, "but, of course, we expected that."

"Uh ... well, earlier I worked several years at low wages in the mission field. I tackled the causes of poverty and injustice in the Third World. I worked directly with children, families and their communities. I even helped some people escape from human traffickers."

"We know, but that all **needed** to be done", said St. Peter.

"But look here ... I've worked hard to be faithful ever since God called me. I've kept my hand on the plow as it were and not looked back."

"And your point is?"

The man, now clearly disconcerted, stammered, "That's all I've got! There's nothing more but the grace of God!"

"Exactly," said Saint Peter, opening the gate. "C'mon in."

Sometimes we feel that because we have gone the extra mile to love our neighbor, we should in some way, be rewarded. Jesus responds to that line of thinking in our gospel reading today.

7 “Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, ‘Come! Sit down for dinner’? 8 Wouldn’t you say instead, ‘Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink’? 9 You won’t thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? 10 In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, ‘We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.’

Jesus is addressing pride and self-esteem. When we serve God and each other, we are simply doing what we are **supposed to do**.

Even with a small amount of faith great things can happen and out of such faith should come service. The service of God's servant is not a matter for negotiation, but is a duty. Jesus pictures a servant coming in from a long day of farming or shepherding, only to be asked to prepare the owner's dinner. The servant will not get a meal until the master is served. Not only that, the servant will not be thanked as if he had done something special. Rather, he will do it because it is his duty: "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." This attitude is in sharp contrast with that of the Pharisee and the Publican in CH 18:12. Here the Pharisee boasts: "I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

The ‘IVP New Testament Commentary Series’ states:

“There is no selective obedience here, no bargaining to do something for the master if he does a favor in return. Our closest contemporary analogy to this obedience is the discipline

of military life. Servants display humility (unworthy servants) and know their position. The servants of God know that God is not obligated to them, as if they were his equal, **but they are obligated to him**, because he is their Creator and Redeemer”.

God owes us nothing but we owe God everything. As Christians, we obey God and we serve God because it is our duty. That is far from menial labor and is instead **holy work**. And my friends, this holy work never ends. Each one of us can serve God in some way.

Today is our Annual Meeting. That should not strike fear in our hearts or cause anyone here to quickly run to their cars before the Recessional Hymn.

As is the case with most of you, this is another Annual Meeting in a long history of Annual meetings. I choose to make my remarks at this time in the context of the Gospel, so that everyone has a chance to hear them, as well as being placed on our website.

Since August 2015, I have been blessed to function as a priest in the Diocese of Michigan. Until December 2018, I had supplied at two Congregations in the Western Diocese and 7 congregations in our Diocese. I have also attended annual meetings at various congregations including sitting in on the one here last October. Jan and I happened to visit St John's in Clinton this past January on the day they were having their meeting. We stayed for their meeting because their meeting is held in the church, just before the Dismissal and Recessional hymn. It is part of their worship service. If you want to eat, you stay for the meeting.

I admit that it brought back memories of my days in the Navy when, on payday, we stood in a line for flu shots, and only after the flu shot, we were able to collect our paychecks.

However, this is my first meeting as a Priest-In-Charge.

A famous philosopher once said: “The key to realizing a dream is to focus not on success but significance — and then even the small steps and little victories along your path will take on greater meaning”.

—Oprah Winfrey.

For me, this quote is very relevant to our gospel reading and to this congregation. When we talk about success, we often relate it to ‘hitting one out of the park’. Putting the work in, for a huge payout. Many congregations within our Diocese and throughout the church are continually busy putting out small fires which does not allow them the freedom of experiencing God in their midst. This can be pretty discouraging.

The majority of congregations today simply can no longer afford a full-time priest. It is what it is. Having a priest who is $\frac{1}{2}$ time or even a $\frac{1}{4}$ time is not necessarily a bad thing. I have said this before; Finding the means to hire a part-time priest is a courageous move forward. Not because I was the one chosen, but because it is a step out in faith by all of you. What we will work on over the next two years, is to figure out what those next steps will be in the life of Christ Church. I have already seen a small shift in how the Vestry is looking at the life of the congregation. That hiring a priest will not automatically make things better and that venture is one by the entire congregation.

I read an article by Catherine A. Caimano who is, what is now called, ‘a free-range priest’. Very interesting concept which is not the same as a supply priest. She describes it this way: “Many churches can no longer afford a full-time priest with benefits, or they struggle so much to afford one that they barely have energy for other ministry. And yet it can feel

depressing to go to part-time clergy: Are we declining? Will we close? These questions can haunt. And yet, as I have seen both clergy and congregations grappling with this question, I also think the larger questions come up: What do we pay a priest for? What do we really need a priest to do? The answers usually boil down to liturgy and sacraments, spiritual guidance and formation, and pastoral presence. The rest of what a priest is usually paid for - administration, teaching, outreach, engagement in the community, even preaching - can and sometimes should be done by deacons or lay people”.

She continues: “When considered this way, the transition for congregations comes about when they stop thinking of themselves as a small non-profit with a priest as CEO, and start thinking of themselves as a religious community of disciples who are each engaged in ministry, some of which they pay a priest for. The analogy I always think of is athletes with a coach - most of the work is being done by the athletes, and they pay a coach to help them get better and learn new things. It is possible to think of a congregation as a group of spiritual 'athletes', growing in their relationship with Jesus, with the priest as their coach”.

I bring this up because I think that we need to look at as many possibilities as we can over the next couple of years as to how we can maintain the energy to continue this ministry in the Adrian area. How do each of us in this congregation pull together to be the ministers that we are called to be? There is no retirement plan for followers of Jesus.

Over these past 10 months, I have spent the majority of my time in outreach. I believe in this and the Vestry has been supportive of this. I joined Kiwanis, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and the Interfaith Alliance. We are hosting the Interfaith Alliance meeting this Tuesday so they can visit our church. I have started sitting out front

with a Prayer request table and plan to also set up outside of Daily Bread, where I volunteer. This month, on each Wednesday, I will be taking classes at Hospice of Lenawee in order to volunteer there. Jan and I hope to soon be present on a Monday or Friday evening at a local restaurant or coffee place just to meet with anyone who wants to come and visit. I am looking for more ways to engage all of you in a weekly prayer group or bible study. We tried on Wednesday nights at 6:00 during Lent. I am also part of a Veteran Caucus on Suicide prevention with CMH. I am certainly open to other suggestions from all of you.

As with our Gospel reading this morning, I do not say all of this to elicit or expect thanks. I honestly enjoy all that I am doing and I am excited about how God might use this for the benefit of this congregation. I also do not ask any of you to do what I would not be willing to do.

What I will ask is for every single member of this congregation to prayerfully look at what their ministries might look like today. I fully realize how much all of you have contributed over the years. I am truly grateful. I am so thankful for the Vestry and all of the work that they put in. Todd as Senior Warden, Sam, Ted, Joyce, and Audrey. I am grateful for Ed's and David's work on keeping up on the lawn this past year. For Audrey's work with the flowers and weeding. For Sam's work with the website and for Joyce's work on Facebook page and the clerical duties.

At 2:00 today, Joyce, Sam, Jan, and myself will be at All Saint's in Brooklyn to attend the pre-convention meeting and then attend the Annual Convention the end of this month. And of course, Joyce continues to serve on the Standing Committee.

I am prayerfully requesting that folks will step up to run for Vestry. This is an Episcopal congregation and we need a Vestry. If any of you have an idea for a Ministry, please bring it up to the Vestry. I will say that I feel at peace right now with seeing how God will guide this congregation over the next few years.

As is customary, you will hear from Todd as Senior Warden and Joyce will give the Treasurer's report at the meeting after this service. One last request from me: this is the time of year in every Episcopal Congregation for the Pledge Drive. I like the term Stewardship better because we are all called to be good stewards. I am going to pass out a list of Spiritual questions for each of you to pray over and answer for yourselves. They are to help you look at all of what I have just discussed as well as how you might pledge time, talent, and finances for this upcoming year. Please take the time over the next few weeks to prayerfully consider these questions. Thank you.

Eternal God, be here with us through the strength and purpose of the Holy Spirit.

Touch our souls with comfort and calmness.

Help us to look forward with confidence and assurance, trusting O God, in your wisdom and love. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.