

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 2010

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [all our] hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, [our] rock and [our] redeemer. (Psalm 19:14 – modified for inclusion)

In today's scriptures, we have heard some of the most wonderful and glorious texts from Scripture, all ripe with great themes, and great stories to work with!

Starting with the Collect, we pray for peace – which we need more than ever; that Peace which passes all understanding, the peace we must work for in our conflicted world; in our own society and perhaps in our own communities and families;

Our first reading from the Old Testament, we hear the Lord God telling the boy Jeremiah that he is ready to proclaim the word, to be a “prophet to the nations” – that God knew him before he was formed in the womb; that he consecrated him before he was born; to fear not.

The Psalm for today reinforces the message of faith, that the Lord God has sustained us and gives us strength since we were born; in whom we take refuge; who is our strong rock, our castle.

Continuing historically, in time line in which the New Testament was written, we have our Gospel story narrating the start of Christ's ministry in Nazareth.

And lastly we have Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the New Testament lesson, where we hear his glorious *Hymn to Love*, which, to me, embodies one of the most powerful descriptions, captures the closest “essence” or feeling of God. **Love** – unending, unconditional, all encompassing and embracing, the source, the Devine.

So the real challenge in preparing today's sermon, was to identify either a single lesson, or a common theme on which to focus.

Taking good counsel and advice from my mentors and Spiritual Directors, was to remember that there'll be plenty of other times to talk in the days ahead; that there's no need to speak about all my accumulated experience in one sermon! And this time, I really intend to keep this within the traditional Episcopal time bounds!

So based on these all the lessons, I decided to talk today about the concept, the idea of **Total Ministry**, which is also sometimes described as **Mutual Ministry**; which I think is an integral part of our common identity here at Christ the King.

But before starting, let's review the passages, to build the foundation:

We are **all** called to ministry – in some form or another. As we've been taught, ministry does not exclusively mean just priestly or clerical ministry, but also means lay ministry; it's the service contained in our Baptismal Covenant, it's our innate talent, our innate gifts.

From both the Old Testament and Psalm we are told that God “knows us before we are born” and he is with us. And perhaps, more importantly, to trust the call and where it leads us during our lives. To trust the ‘nudge’, the itch, the sense that bearing our individual gifts we are all called into service.

From the Gospel of Luke we are told, for a second week in a row, the start of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth. This give us a strong clue that's this message is pretty important to the Church, or at least those who designed the Lectionary readings.

The words, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Wow – now these are very plain, simple, direct and bold words – or in the Jewish vernacular this is real chutzpah!

Jesus claims, acknowledges, asserts that he is the prophet, and accepts his ministry, his calling.

But unlike last week's message, which simply stops with that affirmation, today we continue the story in a very different manner:

"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

So what caused this ruckus – no, this riotous uproar where Jesus was chased from the temple to the outskirts of town to be thrown off a cliff, especially after he had such a great reception?

Remember, in the sentence before, we're first told:

"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"?"

So, obviously, the temple crowd, Jesus contemporary's, were enraged, perhaps insulted, that through his contrasts, and especially with reference to those despised foreigners, those Gentiles – the Widow at Zarephath, and Naaman the Syrian – there was a new, uncomfortable message: ***all are welcome in God's kingdom.***

Already, even in the infancy, the very beginning of his ministry, the radical Christ confronts the established thinking, established norms of his Jewish culture, and lays one of the firm principals of his ministry – which can be summed up in one word: **inclusion**. Or two words: **expansive inclusion**; and then maybe in three: **radical expansive inclusion**.

This is truly a radical statement for the day – that even the “despised foreigners” are welcome in God's kingdom. This message is not well received – at all!

Christ is truly the radical Son of Man, incarnate by God's love for us, whose love is available for everyone – all humankind.

Then moving on to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, we ask how does his beautiful, almost poetic, Hymn of Love, relate to today's Gospel message? What's the tie-in?

Most of us know these verses by heart, since it's a favorite selection at Marriage Feasts:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **Love never ends.***

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; **and the greatest of these is love.***

To me, this passage is best explained, understood, in this way:

St. Paul is instructing an early church community, which is having some internal conflicts, some squabbles, and here, in his “instruction” he **Praises Love** to “contrast over-valuation of spiritual gifts that are producing divisiveness in that early community.” He’s also emphasizing the positive qualities of love which are opposite of the Corinthians’ behavior described elsewhere in the letter. (Holy Bible, New Oxford Edition – notes)

Also, supporting Christ’s message of **inclusiveness**, the passages before and after, St. Paul also emphasizes **diversity in unity**, the acceptance of every individuals’ distinct gifts contained within the entire community.

Now – how do all these lessons fit? To me, they relate to an aspect of Christian ministry.

Late last year, during our annual pledge drive, I came across a blog article, written by Fr. Jake, a pseudonym for the Rev. Terry L. Martin, called “**Total Ministry**” or sometimes also know as “**Mutual Ministry**.” (<http://frjakestopstheworld.blogspot.com/2009/10/clericalism-institutional-challenge.html>)

Fr. Jake, writes and moderates a progressive, Episcopal blog called “Father Jake Stops the World,” with the tag line, “the musings of an eccentric and sometimes heretical Episcopal priest.” Fr. Martin was previously vicar of Holy Spirit Church, Tuckerton, New Jersey, before he was appointed to the Program Officer for Evangelism and Congregational Life for The Episcopal Church Center in NYC on August 13th, 2008. Unfortunately, due to the economic recession which affected all our churches, his position was eliminated a year later, due to budget cuts at General Convention, on August 2009. (http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81831_99275_ENG_HTM.htm)

I think the reason this article caught my eye then, and continues to resonate for me, is that it raises and articulates this very interesting question: Have we, as the faithful within the church become too “consumer” oriented? That is, have we become too dependant on paid, seminary trained leaders? As a institutional church, are we succumbing to “clericalism”? Simply, do we ask our clerics, our clergy to do all the “ministering” in our parish and community? Do we sit in the pew each Sunday and say feed me, feed me?

Fr. Jake writes:

Often, without realizing it, clergy in a small congregation will work long hard hours, feeling that since they consume so much of the pledge income, they need to earn it. They will not only offer the sacraments and visit the sick, but will also offer three classes, make a schedule to visit every member, attend every meeting, get involved in ecumenical events, do the newsletter, change the lightbulbs and mow the lawn.

*There's nothing wrong with staying busy. But, much of what many clergy do on a day to day basis can just as easily be done by someone else. **And by doing it all, the clergy person is actually taking away ministry opportunities from the rest of the members of the community.***

Now, it may be the case that in some places the expectation is that the clergy should indeed do everything. Keep in mind that one of the three shifts we are witnessing is the move to a more "consumer

society" orientation. When we begin to see the clergy as *THE* ministers, then the members become simply passive consumers of ministry. **That is not a healthy model for a Christian community.**

The Diocese of Wyoming has this quote from Elton Trueblood on their Ministry Page:

If you are a Christian, you are a minister. This proposition is absolutely basic to any understanding of the Christian movement. A non-ministering Christian is a contradiction in terms. The Christian faith is not made up of spectators listening to professionals, and it is not for individuals who are seeking, primarily, to save their own souls. It is necessarily made up of persons who are called to serve as representatives of Christ in the world, and to serve means to minister. Ministry is intrinsic to the Christian life. Ministry is not something added or means to an end; it is central and in-eradicable.

A few thoughts:

First: although our parish, our Diocese and our Church all need your financial support – what we call your “treasure” – we also very much need your “talent” – we need your participation in Christian ministry. Remember, ministry is not “just church” or “just within the walls of our church,” but also within the larger Body of Christ – which I submit to you, is the world.

Second: this does not eliminate the necessity of trained clergy.

Third: Christ the King, in my very humble and biased opinion, has an excellent and strong track record with laity involvement and participation who are extremely active in many aspects of parish life, and the larger faith community.

As a congregation, we are inclusive. We work for participation. We stand for justice. We are generously charitable to our parish, our community; and other parts of the world.

So today as we are reminded of Christ’s ministry – what is the “take away” for the week?

My suggestion is to prayerfully consider and ponder: How can I better “walk the talk” of Christ in my daily journey. What one, small action could I take this week, after I leave here, that I can walk closer with Christ and follow his way.

Some suggestions come immediately to mind:

Maybe to reach out, say hello or befriend the shy or lonely kid who isn’t in your clique at school? To make room for them at your lunch table, to invite them in your group of friends.

And for the adults, the same idea at work. To reach out and say hello to that strange new person who works in the same office or building.

Maybe call an old friend or neighbor who you haven’t spoken to in months; better yet call and invited them to lunch or dinner.

Maybe make and enjoy a special meal for your family or friends.

Or the name you heard and recognized during the Prayers of the People – get a Parish Rooster and then give a phone call, or write a card this week. In other words, just don’t leave it to the Rector or the Pastoral Care team, but if you feel the call to make a call or to write a card – then be moved!

Or when you appreciate what someone has done for you, to simply thank them in gratitude.

Or Practice a random act of kindness.

God wants to be in relationship with us, with every human – not just the select few. His redeeming gift to us was to become incarnate in Christ Jesus, to experience our joys and our sorrows; to suffer and die for us.

The Son of Man is for everyone. Gods unending love for us, includes all human beings, not just those who are in our existing pre-defined, socio-economic class; or those who share our same cultural, ethnic or racial origin; or even for just those in our local village – but for everyone.

While we need do little or nothing for redemption, I suggest that to grow in our faith, and our Christian experience by becoming, as best we can, more Christ like – that we live out the good news, demonstrated and exemplified in the life of Christ as the way we get closer to God.

What if we were to remember Paul’s instruction to the us, not just today, or just when we hear it read at weddings. What if, for one week, we all practiced being love, not just among our family and close friends, but also within our secular world?

And finally, the last suggestion, which is perhaps the easiest, yet maybe the most difficult: this week, tell those who are truly important in your life, who surround you, that you love them.

Tell them all.

Amen.

Steve Schunk

January 31, 2010

Christ the King Episcopal, Stone Ridge, NY

It’s a great day to be an Episcopalian!

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany



Year C
 RCL

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

[Psalm 71:1-6](#)

[1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

[Luke 4:21-30](#)

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Old Testament

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The word of the LORD came to me saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
 and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
 and you shall speak whatever I command you,

Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you,

says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

"Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow,

to build and to plant."

The Psalm

Psalm 71:1-6 Page 683, BCP

In te, Domine, speravi

1

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed.

2

In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me.

3

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold.

4

Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, *
from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.

5

For you are my hope, O Lord GOD, *
my confidence since I was young.

6

I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength; *
my praise shall be always of you.

The Epistle

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The Gospel

Luke 4:21-30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to

me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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