

Sermon Pentecost 2  
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church  
June 22, 2014  
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This has been a full weekend. Yesterday I had the privilege of accompanying members from Holy Trinity who had chosen to either reaffirm their baptismal covenant or who had chosen to make their confirmation in the Episcopal Church, joining this arm of the Protestant faith, and choosing to live their lives grounded in this tradition.

Today we pause to recognize those who are graduating from EfM, or Education for Ministry after four years of study. People often come and ask me about EfM, primarily because it is a program that was borne from my seminary, The University of the South, Sewanee. Their concern often is something like this “you know I’d really like to study some more but this ministry thing...you know I’m not really interested in going to seminary...I mean I don’t want to do what you do...I don’t want to be a minister.” So I carefully explain to them that EfM is not a precursor to seminary, or a way of discerning those who should go to seminary, that in fact it has little do with seminary or ordained ministry, that the people who steward the program even at Sewanee are by and large not ordained and that in the main those who mentor a program at a specific church, although they have gone through pretty rigorous training are not ordained either and that is by design. The purpose I explain is to build up the largest body of the church to prepare them for the work of their baptismal covenant the ministry of the laity.

One of the great prophetic voices of the church Verna Dozier called the “church, the people of God, to claim as our own the work of reconciliation in the world, the work to which our Christian faith calls us.” For Verna, the most important work of the church was done, not in fact by the clergy, those ordained and set aside but by the laity consecrated by their baptisms to preach and teach, to live the Gospel in order to change the world.

Yesterday as Bishop Creighton was preparing his group of confirmands for the service he talked about the sacrament of confirmation, now I have to take a moment to correct him. Confirmation is not actually a sacrament in the Episcopal

church, in fact there are only two sacraments in the church; the first is baptism, by which we believe one has full right of inclusion in the church and the other is Holy Eucharist; confirmation is considered sacramental but not truly a sacrament. But what exactly is a sacrament? Well according to the Book of Common Prayer, a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. So if I take that definition of a sacrament I might just agree with the bishop and say that many things in life are sacraments. Why is not the birth of a child a sacrament, or perhaps listening to a beautiful piece of music? Could it not be that the play of light on the new leaves at the first crest of spring is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace? Bishop Creighton continued and explained that the laying on of the bishop's hands at confirmation is not the sacramental piece but that it is the outward and visible sign of an inward and visible grace, that grace being the individual's response to the teachings of and the presence of Christ in their heart and I would add to the stirring of the Holy Spirit in their life that has led them to this place of confirming. Verna Dozier, Bishop Creighton and I as well as many, many others throughout the history of Christianity including Jesus himself would say this is where the hard work of discipleship begins.

This is the work of which our Gospel speaks today. In a rather harsh discourse with the disciples Jesus shares these words:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

“For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.”

Jesus attempts to make it abundantly clear to those who have chosen to follow him that the road will not be a smooth and easy one to traverse, that they will in fact lose family and friends along the way and perhaps even more but, he also promises that the reward will be great.....and guaranteed.

I think for many of us in church today, this “difficulty” of the faith journey or the potential of “risk” seems to be something of history or perhaps in some far off land where we read of Christians being persecuted but many of us have never known anyone who had to choose against everything they knew to express their faith. I have known three such people in my life and I consider them both remarkable and brave and faithful, they are all now confirmed Episcopalians. One a friend I have known

long in the church large a regular fixture at National Convention and expert in Canon Law surely a Christian. It wasn't in fact until her father died that I learned that she was in fact Jewish and that while she had long ago come to believe in Jesus Christ as the way the truth and the life she was terrified of living out that understanding. You see being baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church would mean total excommunication from her family. But one day the inward moving of the spirit propelled her to ask to be baptized and so surrounded by friends in a fountain outside the convention in Indianapolis she was baptized and her journey of separation and reconciliation began. Another of my beloved's found her way wandering from the more fundamental and literal teachings of her family to finally come to find a place of resonance in the breadth of the Episcopal Church and with time came to claim that voice as her own and yet another beloved came from the teachings of the Mormon church to find a home here. And while for each of these the threat of death in the physical sense may not have loomed large the loss of leaving that which has been known, that which has formed them thus far the very real risk of excommunication from family and friends was and is no less real and no less threatening than that which our Gospel speaks of today and for each of them and for the many, many others who make up the body of Christ the choice to mark with an outward and visible sign, to confirm the inward and spiritual grace that has already marked and sealed their compels them to join the church, the people of God and claim their work.

Some years ago as I was interviewing for a church a member of the vestry with which I was meeting asked me this question: "what are you going to do to grow our church?" My answer was and is, "I" am not going to do anything to grow your church. If you want to grow your church you are going to grow your church, if you want to welcome people you are going to, if you want to invite your neighbors and friends you are going to. If you hang all of your hopes and all of your expectations on one person, the clergy to grow your church you are going to fail.

I believe the closing paragraphs of Verna Dozier's *The Dream of God* resonate with that conversation and with each of us as strongly today as the day she wrote them and she writes:

"The people of God are called to a possibility other than the kingdoms of the world. They must be ambassadors—again, St. Paul's word—to every part of life. They witness to another way that governments can relate to one another, that money can be earned and spent, that doctors and care-givers and engineers and lawyers and teachers can serve their constituencies, that wordsmiths and musicians and artists and philosophers can give us new visions of the human condition. That is the ministry of the laity.

All of them need the support system of the institutional church. There must be those resting places where the story is treasured and passed on in liturgy and education. There must be those islands of refuge where the wounded find healing; the confused, light; the fearful, courage, the lonely, community; the alienated, acceptance; the strong, gratitude. Maintaining such institutions is the ministry of the clergy.

We have all failed the dream of God. The terribly patient God still waits.”

We are the ones for whom our terribly patient God awaits. We have confirmed through word and action, through chance and through choice by means of outward and visible signs the movement of His grace in our lives. We have claimed our rightful place as the people of God and now it is time to make the possibility of reconciliation real.

Amen!