

Sermon Proper 17

August 31, 2014

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

The Rev. Leslie M. St. Louis

A little later this morning we will baptize a new member not only into the community that is Holy Trinity Episcopal Church but into the body of Christ, the larger community of those who profess Christ as Lord and Savior. Indeed this is an important rite of passage, a sacrament in the church, for the individual being baptized and his or her family but it is also an important moment for each of us who come to witness and participate in this service this day.

This is a time when we can reflect on our own baptism, which most of us scarcely remember since we still practice infant or childhood baptism in this church and it is a time for us to recommit to that covenant not only for this child but for ourselves.

It is a time for us to ascertain just what is the body of Christ? How do we experience it and how pray tell do we “be” it in the world in which we live and move and have our being?

St. Teresa of Avilla penned these words in answer to that question.

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ's compassion to the world
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.”

The simplest answer to the question is just that, that we are the body of Christ, in all our brokenness, and sinfulness and despaired-ness and in all our joyfulness and successfulness and wholeness, we are the body of Christ. I must confess that often when I get up and look myself in the mirror first thing in the morning I have to wonder if God might not want to look for a plan B and quickly so ill equipped do I feel for the task at hand. If we read either of the choices for this Sunday in the Old Testament, we will find that we are in good company, Moses in our lesson from

Exodus questions his abilities as does Jeremiah in track 2 which we did not read this morning. In seminary we had to read the book *The Diary of a Country Priest* by Georges Bernanos. Bernanos tells the story of a young, unnamed priest who struggles with his sense of vocation. Despite his earnest efforts, and the encouragement of a trusted colleague, he feels like a failure. From a human perspective, he's not mistaken.

His small, rural parish is bored, boring, and petty. They gossip about him. He gets hate mail. His catechism class and sports club both falter. He gets embroiled in the bitter struggles of a wealthy family. He clashes with clergy bureaucrats over how to do his job.

Nonetheless, the priest perseveres. He loves his people. He visits every home every year. He prays for them.

His personal life is just as bad. He broods about the shame and pain of his peasant upbringing. He suffers from a chronic illness, an impoverished diet, and no money. He's self-conscious about his "superhuman clumsiness" and his social awkwardness. He has an "insuperable disgust" with his "absurd self."

He's powerless in the presence of suffering, and ponders the mystery of prayer. He's lonely and isolated. He sometimes feels like he's play-acting and parroting pious clichés.

Reflecting upon his "wretched weakness," he confides to his diary: "Oh, yes, I've worked hard enough! I've done my best, and what's the use? My best is nothing."

I'm guessing that whether we are clergy or not we all can relate to this feeling at some point in our lives that we have given it our all and our very very best and yet the outcomes seems to be for naught. And yet we continue valiantly to try to be the body of Christ and to bring those we meet into the community set about building the kingdom of God.

Do you know one of the places I most experience the body of Christ? It is here, right here in this very space. Now I rather imagine that you are thinking that I am going to say that I experience it as we all gather to receive communion and that is certainly true but I experience it well before that, sometimes out in the parking lot as I watch people "join" each other for church, I experience it in the collective of tears when we grieve together, in the awe inspired intake of breath when Christian came in without his walker, in the stillness of the healing service a couple weeks ago and yes in the rather raucous "peace" that is uniquely ours.

I experience it over beer at the Bowie Baysox, in the squeals of 7th grade girls calling for me at Panera (they forget I don't like them) it is in those conjoined moments where the threads of individual lives come together in the most unexpected and brilliant of ways that I know that Christ is present and we are him.

It is that palpable presence of Christ that makes, for me, our raucous "peace" not just an unruly part of the service but a mandate both to whatever follows and from whatever follows. It is that touch that is the incarnate presence of Christ that creates the communion that follows.

This is what I believe we desire to bring those whom we baptize into a presence that elevates us even when we feel most inadequate, that includes us even when we feel most estranged and that secures us when we feel most unsure. That my friends is the Good news that we proclaim in Christ's name.

Our baptisms call us, require us to continue to proclaim that word. Not unlike the calling of Moses that we hear in our lesson from Exodus.

*God called to him out of the bush,
"Moses, Moses!"
And he said, "Here I am."
– Exodus 3.4*

While we are not called forth from the burning bush our response is not unlike that of Moses "here I am." The question for each of us, a question that is borne out in scripture time and time again is this "Will we open our eyes, our ears? What will we do with what we see, with what we hear? How will we bear the terrible delight of the blessing that blazes before us, that burns within us?" (Jan Richardson *The Painted Prayerbook* <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>)