

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**October 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009**  
**TEXT: Matthew 13:31-33**  
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

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Good morning, everybody. Y'all may have gotten a couple of letters from us earlier this week, and I thought it might be a good idea for us to take a few minutes this morning to talk about them...just so that everybody knows what's going on, and we all have the same information, and we can all be on the same page the best way possible...

As most of you know by now, I am one of six candidates for bishop in the Diocese of Louisiana.

In the Episcopal Church, a bishop is an overseer of a diocese, and a diocese is a community of congregations. In the Diocese of Virginia there are about 180 congregations. In the Diocese of Louisiana—which is southeastern Louisiana, including New Orleans and Baton Rouge—there are fifty-five congregations. So it's about a third the size of this diocese. A bishop is charged with being the chief pastor of a diocese, and with guarding the faith and unity of the Church. I also believe that a bishop has an apostolic responsibility to reach people for the sake of the Kingdom.

This process began about three-and-a-half months ago when a friend of mine asked me whether I would be willing to allow my name to be put forward as a candidate for bishop in that diocese. He had been praying about it, and thought my gifts might match their needs. So he asked. I was flattered, because it's always flattering when someone says "here is something you might do well," but I did nothing about it.

A month later—the middle of July—he called back with the same question. My practice is that when something comes back, I think it a good idea to pay attention. So in this second conversation, I agreed to be willing...not because I'm looking for another job, because I'm not. And not because I'm waiting to be a bishop, because I'm not. I'm happy in my service to the Lord as a priest, and I love serving with you.

Mostly, I agreed to be willing because I believe God asks us to be willing.

I think you know by now that I am deeply committed to the future of the Episcopal Church. I'm a life-longer in this tradition. It's the tradition that formed me, and which gave us birth. I'm committed to its future because of what it has given us in our past. I'm also committed because what matters more than any Church is the ongoing, in-breaking revelation of God's Kingdom here on earth—because that's what Jesus was bringing--and I think our tradition has a particular role to play in that work.

And I was pretty sure—at least for the next little while—I would be part of that future in the context of Christ Church. But you know and I know that sometimes surprising things happen. So, what happened is that I got asked to be open to the possibility that maybe God wants me to be part of this future in another place and in another way. *Maybe...* So with Bernadette, we decided we would take whatever the next step was, and see what God had in store...for me, and my family, and Christ Church, and the Diocese of Louisiana. You know, Hillary and I stand up here and talk about trusting God all the time. Well, this seemed a great opportunity to actually walk it rather than just talk it, and do so in a real life way that mattered.

So at the end of July I had a few conversations with four people in the Diocese of Louisiana. We talked. They asked me about a few different things. I asked them about a few different things. Afterwards, with my approval, they put my name in nomination.

I had to fill out all the material for a background check, and I was asked to respond to six questions. I got all that material back to them by the end of August, and they accepted it.

About three weeks after they received all that stuff I went to bed on a Monday night firmly convinced—for a variety of reasons--that my time in this process was done; that what God had in mind in this was a few new friends in Louisiana. Which was fine with me, and I slept well.

So the next afternoon—a week ago this past Tuesday—I was informed I was a candidate...unexpectedly, and for a whole bunch of reasons, very much to my surprise. Now, the way this works in the Church is that you don't talk about this publicly until it becomes public. It became public this past Thursday morning. Hence, the letters...

That's the story of what's happened to this point.

What's next looks like this: All six candidates and their spouses will spend time in the Diocese of Louisiana during the first week in November. We get a tour; we meet people; they ask us questions. We'll get a chance to ask them some questions, as well. That's it for our time there. Between now and then, I'll be doing studying some their life.

And then, on Saturday, December 5, the clergy and representatives of each congregation get together for a convention. And they vote. That's the way we do it in our tradition...we vote because we believe the Holy Spirit works most powerfully through a democratic process, and it's a simple majority. I'm not there for all that. We'll be here in Richmond.

And then, five months after the election—in May 2010—the person who is elected will be consecrated, and begin their service as Bishop of the Diocese of Louisiana.

Now there are five other candidates. They are all immensely well-qualified. What that means is that most likely, my only role in their process is to help them choose someone else to be their next bishop. And that's fine with me. Because if that's the way it ends up, we continue serving together. And if it ends up differently, Bishop Johnston, our own bishop, helps us through that transition; we find another rector; and we keep going.

Now over the last few days I've received some emails and phone calls, and I'm grateful for your kind words. And along the way...here and there...there've been a few questions... Because, you know, we got a lot going on...we got a building to finish; we got to get started on the youth space; we got a second youth minister to call; and in three weeks, we're going to ask everyone to make their financial commitment to this congregation for 2010 and we're going to ask the best of one another there. There are important things our ministry teams—and our ministry teams are us—important things we've said we want to do next year, and you'll hear more about them. For adults, right now we're doing DOCC again, we got Bible Studies happening, and we're starting Emmaus Groups; we're working on bringing Nathan Dungan back in February to do some deeper teaching on living well with our wealth. We got more kids in the preschool than ever before, and almost every day of the week there's a twelve-step group meeting somewhere on this campus. Sometimes, twice a day. Keith and Missy and the rest of our music leadership oversee five different choirs and at least two bands. At the 10:45 service we're trying to figure out a way to fit everybody in. We're making mission plans for Sudan, and Peru, and we've already got CARITAS scheduled for twice next year.

So yes, there is a lot going on. There's a lot going on because these are tasks and purposes to which the Lord has inspired us. *Us!* This has been *our* work...the work of all of

us...and the “us” here goes beyond the “us” who are here. It reaches back to the people who came before us, and even further back to the ones who believed we should exist, and even further back than that. Over the years, we’ve listened the best way we know how, and done the best we can, just inviting, growing, and living...and the Lord smiles upon all that, and blesses it. Jesus looks down, and sees us going on, and says to all the angels: “Look at all my children down there. They’re just like mustard seeds!”

You see, we are a people. And we will always be a people. And we are Kingdom people. That’s how God has made us. We are God’s Kingdom people, gathered, and then sent. We’re not an audience. We’re a congregation. We’re not consumers of a product. We’re the Body of Christ, with every member playing a vital part.

We all know that Jesus talks a whole lot more about the Kingdom of God than he does the Church. Right up front he says that the reason for his coming is to bring in the Kingdom. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That’s what Jesus says when he begins his ministry. In translation, what he says is: “Come back. Everything you’ve been waiting for is arriving.”

He doesn’t say that it’s here already. He doesn’t say that it has already arrived. We can look around and easily see that the Kingdom of God ain’t completely here. But he doesn’t say that it’s *there*, either...as if the Kingdom of God is only found when we’re in heaven. He says it’s both. It’s here and it’s there. It’s arrived, and it’s arriving. It’s already, but not yet. It’s among us, but at the same time, we seek it. It’s God’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom, but at the same time, when we say the Lord’s Prayer we ask for the Kingdom of God to come. It’s given, but we ask for it to arrive. We get a glimpse, but maybe not the whole picture.

It’s the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings, and it is a both/and kind of existence. It’s an in-between way of life. It’s not settled. It doesn’t work the way we work. It doesn’t unfold according to our plan. It defies our expectations, our values, and our explanations.

Even Jesus doesn’t try to explain the Kingdom. He just describes it...

In it, the first are last and the last are first; the greatest are the servants; and when one goes for a walk one carries a cross.

It’s citizens choose love over fear; mercy over hatred; forgiveness over revenge; generosity over avarice; reconciliation over division; trust in God over trust in ourselves.

It’s like a little bit of yeast in a pile of dough. It’s hidden, but it makes the whole batch grow.

Or, it’s like walking through an empty lot and finding a million dollars hidden behind a tree. If we got any common sense at all, we’ll put the money down on that lot this afternoon.

It’s like a field where there are both wheat and weeds, and that it’s the owner of the field, not the workers, who gets to decide which is which.

It’s like a fisherman’s net. It brings in all kinds of fish.

It’s like a king, who says when you served the hungry, and thirsty, and poor, and those in prison, you’ve actually served the king.

It’s like a father, who when he sees his sinful son returning home after being lost, runs out to welcome him and who instead of scolding him, throws him a party, and weeps for joy.

It’s like a shepherd, who will leave behind the ninety-nine who know who they are for the sake of the one who’s lost.

It’s like a feast, and everyone gets invited...especially those that never get invited to feasts.

And it's like a mustard seed. And mustard is pungent and fiery. Like salt or yeast, a little bit goes a long way. Ancient mustard was also uncontrollable. If the wild kind of mustard got in your field, you had a problem. But even the domesticated kind of mustard could grow so powerfully that no human being could control it. You see, you can't contain the mustard seed. It may start small, but eventually it takes over the entire garden. It will just keep growing, until the birds can find a home in it. And even then, it's not done. What's the kingdom of God like? It's like a smelly plant that can't be controlled, and that just keeps going.

Well, we're mustard seed kind of people. We may start small, but we just keep going. We just keep doing. We get it right. We get it wrong. But we don't stop. We listen well sometimes, and sometimes we don't. But we keep listening. Sometimes a fragrant offering, and at our best smelling like sweat. But no matter what, through the mercy of God, we just keep at it the way the mustard plant just keeps going and going.

That's kingdom-living, and the kind of life we've been given. That's the kind of people God has made us, together.

And let me tell you something...I've been here a long time and I want to tell you real clear—God has given us every gift we need to live that life, to answer that call, and to do our part to help Jesus reveal God's reign to a world that needs it, starting with our neighbors.

I'm just about done today, everybody. At the beginning, I spent some time talking about all this bishop election stuff just because I thought we all needed to hear it. Maybe we did; maybe we didn't; I don't know, because I've never done this before. Thanks for your understanding, and when it comes to all that, what'll be is what'll be.

But talking about that sure is boring compared to talking about the Kingdom. And talking about the Kingdom sure is boring compared to living it. Because living it is where the action is. And that we get to be part of it is miraculous. And we are most certainly part of it in a both/and sort of way...when we're here together, but more importantly when we're out there...kind of like yeast in the bread; kind of like a mustard seed.