

Pentecost Season A, June 15, 2008
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Genesis 18.1-15, 21.1-7
Psalm 116
Romans 5.1-8
Matthew 9.35 — 10.23

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth.... (Collect for the Day: Proper 6)

INTRODUCTION

We are in the joyous season of the year when we celebrate parenthood. A few weeks ago we celebrated Mother's Day, and then today we remember the dads on Father's Day.

Parenthood is an honored vocation, but each year it does seem to be getting significantly more complicated than ever before. For one thing it feels like there are so many more things a parent must do – with so little time available to do it. My wife Carolyn and I have shared parenting responsibilities for our two daughters. For years we were aware of how important it was for us to have a vision for our girls. Of course, as they grew up our daughters didn't always see the wisdom of our vision. I was always puzzled at their failure to see the excellence in our desires and decisions for them. Nevertheless, we knew that it was our responsibility to help them to establish foundations in life – always knowing that ultimately they would make decisions based upon those foundations. Then, once the foundations had been established they had to determine their own way in life.

I. Most parents I know assume that it is their responsibility to remove as many unnecessary barriers and obstructions from the life paths of their children as they can. These are the barriers and obstructions that could hinder their children from fulfilling the shared visions. However, through time we realized that we didn't want to remove all of the barriers, because we knew it would be healthy for our daughters to know that there are many unavoidable struggles in life. In these cases, as much as we could, we tried to walk with them when they struggled to work through life's big decisions.

For our children and, for that matter any child, one of the major decisions in life is to decide whose child they are. Of course, with the exception of a few awkward moments, most often occurring when life was not going their way, when they clearly told us that they did "...not want to be a part of this family," both of our children knew that they would always be our daughters and we would always be their parents.

A larger decision for children and challenge for the parents is to recognize and accept the spiritual family, as the collect prayer said "the household," to which they belong.

II. The Gospel lesson for today is about the family to which we belong. Of particular interest to me is the description of how Jesus called the 12 men who would be the members of his spiritual family. Many of these early believers struggled to understand how their earlier Jewish beliefs fit into their new-found faith in Jesus the messiah. As was the case with many of the biblical writers, the apostles all knew that ancestry was of great importance to them. You have read in the bible the ancestral lists, almost always placed in the scriptures to show people of faith how their ancestral paths that led back to the fathers and mothers of the faith. These ancestral lists led them back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David; and to Leah, Rachel, Sara and Ruth. These ancestral stories, sometimes so tedious as to cause us to ask "When will it be over," were used to help people be grounded and to know about the spiritual foundations that had been laid for them.

As Jesus assembled his entourage of 12 apostles, those men clearly stood upon the shoulders of those who had gone before them. The apostles were not on their own and living off of their independent wits. They were children of God who represented all those faithful men and women who had gone before them.

Years ago when I was in my late teens and early twenties, I had a major struggle with the church, this Episcopal Church to be particular, and I left it. In my infinite youthful wisdom I had determined that the church was irrelevant to the world in which I lived. I could see no place where I could find anything of importance or substance for my life within the church. Today as I look back upon that decision, it is not hard to see my blind-spot. In my youth I saw myself as having the ability to be entirely self-sufficient, not having the need for any other person, or as I said it, having no need for a crutch upon which to lean. I thought that I could live a life totally whole and complete on my own – and without God – or without God's people.

That all worked quite well for me until several life events forced me to come to grips with evil; the evil I was fully capable of visiting upon another human being. I then began to get the message that my self-sufficiency was nothing but a lie I had told myself.

During this spiritual sojourn I had distanced myself from God. Let me be perfectly clear that I don't think God ever left me, but that I lost the consciousness of God's presence in my life. It was only when I concluded that I had no power within myself to find forgiveness, forgiveness for myself as well as for others, that I realized the need for God in Christ within my life. It was then and there that I became aware of the foundation upon which my life had been founded in Baptism. It was then that I realized how as a small child in baptism I had been committed to the care and grace of God. It was then that I realized that as a baby I had been grafted into the tree of life – God's tree of life. It was then that I realized I had been made a part of that family and household known as the Church of Jesus Christ.

III. I became aware that in the foundation of Holy Baptism I had been given God's vision for life. Baptism is God's call to us.

In baptism, confirmation and in scores of prayers we continually remind ourselves, that not only has God called us, but also that in one way or another nearly every man, woman, and child in this church today has had the opportunity to say yes to God's calling.

In the opening acclamation for the BCP service of Holy Baptism the celebrant affirms:

There is one Body and one Spirit;
And the people reply: There is one hope in God's call to us.

The only realistic way to have any sense of the vision of God is to understand how God calls us. The call or bidding of God is as foundational to the vision of who and what we are, as is a solid foundation to the building of a home. In the Gospels we are told that the firmer the foundation, the more substantial the faith. That firm foundation is found in being a part of the family or household of God.

There is an old gospel hymn that some of you may know. We don't normally sing it in our church. I know it because I spent 27 years as a Navy chaplain and sung this hymn with various Christian congregations made of people coming together from a broad assortment of faith traditions.

"On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand."

Today our scriptures and prayers remind us that the solid rock upon which we stand is Christ, and that to stand upon Christ is to be a part of the family or household of God.

Did you notice in the scriptures that as soon as Jesus called the twelve disciples into his household, Jesus sent them out? There was no opportunity for them to go sit on the porch, put up their feet and drink ice tea. That would have to wait until later on, much later. Immediately Jesus put the apostles to work. Notice that the apostles were given the same work that Jesus had been doing: teaching the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. The apostles were employed right away by being sent out to take Jesus' message to the people who most needed that message. Jesus' message was not complicated. It did not require going to graduate school to be able to be a good communicator. The main thing was to put one foot in front of the other and go.

Many of you have seen all of these young people here who are a part of the Campus Crusade for Christ summer program. The main thrust of their summer is to teach young men and women how to step forward and to open their mouths for Jesus.

What motivated the disciples to take Jesus' message to the people? You might say that the apostles were motivated because they were told to go. The apostles went out

because Jesus was a person of authority who gave them their marching orders. I think if you said that you'd be correct.

Are you motivated to get that message out to others – as the apostles were motivated? What motivates you? Today, after all that has happened in the church since the calling of the first Apostles – such as the crucifixion, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – I think that the motivation of an evangelist must be more than just a direct order from the messiah. I think that the most appropriate motivation of an evangelist for Christ is thankful appreciation and gratitude.

Being made one with Christ and being forgiven of our sins is a good reason for gratitude and appreciation. Today our evangelism need not be something we do just because we're told to do it. The sharing of the good news of Christ is best accomplished with a smile on our face and comes as a direct result of having a grateful heart – because we are forgiven – because we are made members of the household and family of God – because in our baptisms God grafted us into the tree of life.

CONCLUSION

Christ is the sure foundation, the solid rock upon which we stand. To stand upon that solid rock is to be a part of God's household the church.

This is a radical message that is both dangerous and life-giving. Those who personally accept the implications of the message will never again be able to accept the status quo of religion. The true and effective follower of Jesus will have the compassion of Jesus for sheep that are in need of a shepherd. The good news about the new foundation of life is a message you will want to share with old and young alike; with the rich and with the poor; and with people whose skin is red, yellow, black or white.

My prayer is:

That you will take the love of Jesus Christ into the entire world.

That you will take the blessings of God the creator to all the people of your life.

And that you will take the strength and resolve of the Holy Spirit with you allowing that spirit to work fully in you, today and every day of your life.

AMEN.