

Trinity, Portsmouth, VA
December 10th, 2019
Tuesday after Second Advent (A)
Celebration of New Ministry
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 96
Romans 12:1-18
Matthew 18:12-14

Many of you probably think that the sole reason we are coming together is to celebrate the new ministry of Fr. Grant. Stokes. While that is correct in reality we are here to celebrate more than that. We are gathered to celebrate the new ministry of the new and reformed congregation of Trinity Church. You are called, I believe, to be a new body of Christ.

Give or take a few weeks, a decade ago I sat in the Trinity rectory with your search committee to do a mock interview for a new rector. To say the least, that was an interesting evening. Distinctly I remember leaving that meeting, and as I drove home I was convinced that the well intentioned and dedicated members of the search committee were nowhere near having a consensus about the person who would be their next rector. I couldn't stop wondering: "Where will all this end up?"

Since then you have had four priests serving as either rector or rector interims: John Throop, Kate Bobbitt, Charles Smith and Robert Davenport. Before them you had three other priests who served for short tenures: Howard Hanchey, Peter Hogg and Betty Hudson.

Fast forward ten years, and tonight we're seating Grant as rector. This is a new day. With a new rector and a renewed spirit you are building a new foundation. This is not a foundation that harkens us to look back to the past and praise famous men – or women – that we may replicate what they have done. Conversely I believe we are called to lean forward to build upon the good work of Grant's predecessors as they helped to build the foundation of a renewed faith community. When people make themselves available for new things, God in the Holy Spirit can indeed be present to mold and shape the new emerging being. Tonight we are marking a new start.

If ever there was a good narrative for the renewal of a faith community, it is found in Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome. I believe that there is a good order of how the community of Christ-followers is to be built. Though much more than a how-to-build instruction manual, there are elements in Paul's letter which boldly and significantly stand out to me. Listen again to Paul's admonitions:

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

- 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
- 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
- 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
- 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
- 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
- 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.
- 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
- 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

In the opening verse for the reading from Romans Paul wrote “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”¹ In Paul’s day within the Jewish cycle of prayer and worship events animal sacrifice was a common event. In fact, two weeks from tonight we will recall that in our telling of the Christmas story when we hear about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Joseph coming to Jerusalem to the temple to make the annual sacrifice of animals on the altar of God. Paul is reminding his people that no longer will deceased animals need to be offered to God. In their place the offering will call for the followers of God – this congregation – to be willing to offer their lives and their labors for the mission to which God has called them. This sacrifice is the first step of your renewal.

Next, following Paul’s instructions to the Christians in Rome you are called to renew your minds through an inward spiritual re-formation. We can affirm that this very challenging re-formation will happen as we receive the love of God in Jesus Christ. Recalling Jesus’ instruction in the Gospel of John, we remember and live into Jesus greatest commandment to us: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”² It is that simple and yet that transformative.

Finally, as a new and renewed community you are called to bear the evidence of your renewal in two particular ways. It is normal and fitting that you should be able to be a community marked with joy. The old adage is true that joy is the flag that is flown from the heart when the King is in residence there. The other sign and evidence of your renewal is your ability to be hospitable and welcoming.

Nothing could be more important than your ability to be hospitable and welcoming. This is, I believe, where the “rubber meets the road.” In my experience hospitality is both very rewarding and very challenging and difficult. Yet, I believe that when hospitality and welcoming is significantly difficult, Christians have probably found the spot in life where God wants them to be.

Think about it for a moment. As you recall the stories about Jesus’ life written by Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John how many times did Jesus turn anyone away? You know the answer to that question: zero. In fact, the only persons against

¹ Romans 12:1, NRSV.

² John 15:12, NSRV.

whom Jesus even pushed back were the persons who claimed to be the most religious, and they got at cross purposes with Jesus because they had created a version of God in their own image rather than of a holy God.

In the Old Testament reading we heard from Isaiah: “A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”³ Today the wilderness is no barren desert as it was in the days of Isaiah, or of Jesus, or of Paul. The desert today is the barren land of a moral wilderness where the mores of our faith are absolutely foreign. You know as well as I know the battle grounds where the needs of the stranger, the immigrant, the homeless, the widow, the orphan, the poor are not only neglected, but the people in those categories are castigated as being less than whole and basically deficient persons. The fact is that they are all children of the living God, and we are their keepers.

The lovely and pastoral story in Matthew’s Gospel tonight is of the shepherd who has one hundred sheep and finds one that has gone astray. When it would have been much easier and safer for the shepherd to have said that to have 99 sheep is enough, the good shepherd can say no such thing. The good shepherd must leave the 99 and go after the one who has left the fold and gone astray. Finding that single lost sheep is the cause for much jubilation and rejoicing.

To return to where I started this evening, at the celebration of a new ministry this story about the lost sheep is usually applied to the new rector. While you can do that, that is the very least of the application. The real application of the story of going after the lost sheep is applied to all y’all. Collectively, you are the shepherds of the sheep. Fr. Grant’s responsibility is to ensure that you are equipped to the the shepherds you have been called to be.

Quite literally tonight we are going to face these bold expectations to be a renewed and reformed body of Christ, and to sacrifice our lives when all of us renew our baptismal covenant and acknowledge our indelible and ineradicable connection to God in Christ. AMEN.

³ Isaiah 40:3, NRSV.