

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Pentecost 4, June 28, 2009, Propers for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Ezekiel 34: 11-16, Psalm 87, 2 Timothy 4: 1-8, John 21: 15-19

+In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the front cover of your service bulletin you see a picture --- the picture of the two apostles, Peter and Paul, embracing one another in Christian solidarity and fellowship. These two apostles, imposing and committed, form the twin pillars of the early Christian Church. They were leaders of a dynamic and still shaping movement centered around the risen Christ. No two followers of Jesus were more responsible for the formation of the Christian mission apart from Jesus himself than were Peter and Paul.

The embrace represents the ideal of one Church, one Gospel, one mission. The Book of Acts and Paul's Letter to the Galatians tells us that, in fact, Peter and Paul, did not always see eye to eye. They understood their individual calling and the specifics of their mission in different ways.

It's a little like saying Ford and GM both make automobiles. They do. But they are two separate corporate cultures. I think it was a bit like that between Peter and Paul. The Church in its ironic wisdom made June 29, tomorrow, the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul --- putting them together, celebrating their apostolic witness as one unified effort. The two of them would be a little surprised by this development, but in the end that's how we see it --- two strong, charismatic leaders who built a lasting legacy.

I took some liberty with the Church's lectionary and used the scripture readings for the Feast of Peter and Paul instead of those assigned for the Sunday. I have one personal reason. I was ordained priest at this time of the year. Late June ordinations are called Petertide ordinations in honor of this day. And my first parish was St. Peter's Church, Wolvercote, in the city of Oxford, England.

The second reason for keeping this feast today has to do with the events shaping our mission as a congregation. This week the interim period ends. The next rector of Christ Church has arrived and Sunday, July 5, John Talk will stand in this pulpit and celebrate from this altar as priest and rector. The Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, apostles and witnesses of Christ, allows us to focus on the ministry of this parish as you begin to welcome John and look ahead to where God is calling you.

The purpose of an interim rector is to prepare a congregation to receive new leadership and to bring awareness within the parish of its mission. I thought the two founding apostles, Peter and Paul, would help us do this as personal symbols of the ministry and mission of the Church.

As you heard in the epistle reading, Paul writes to his successor Timothy and encourages him "to do the work of an evangelist and to carry out his ministry fully." This seems to me words we need to hear -- "do the work" and "carry it out fully." We have received an immeasurable gift, a profound and eternal expression of God's love and compassion. Paul reminds Timothy there is a work to be done as a consequence of this gift. We are bearers of good news. How then do we understand what this means?

Jesus, in the Gospel story, commands Peter "to feed my sheep." It seems to me that both the reading from the Prophet Ezekiel and the Gospel account from John have this one unifying image. The verb that gets used over and over again is "to feed." Both lessons speak of the people of faith as a flock of sheep and God as the shepherd, but the strong, commanding verb that jumps out is "feed."

We are hungry. To thrive spiritually, emotionally, morally and physically we have to eat the right food. Ezekiel calls it rich pasture, good grazing. Then Ezekiel gets real specific as to what God will feed the people. “I will feed my people with justice.”

God’s justice is both demanding and compassionate. It’s solid food. Listen carefully to what God says through Ezekiel. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy.”

What will God do? How will God feed us?

Seek and bring back,

Bind up and strengthen,

And perhaps destroy.

This is what God does to nourish the flock. This is God’s good food.

The lost and strayed are restored to community and fellowship. We humans can’t live without one another in genuine community.

The hurt and weak are healed and strengthened – brought to health. For we are not fully what we are meant to be if we are sick and faltering in mind, body and spirit.

And finally God will tear down if need be. God will root out the exploiters, those who live at the cost of others. The fat and strong are officials who take bribes, mine owners who don’t regard the safety of workers and dictators who pillage their own people.

I take these strong verbs as our mandate, the way to mission. For what God does is what we are called to do.

I would ask you to do a mental exercise as you think about Christ Church. Take a hypothetical piece of paper and write at the top, “Feed my sheep.” Then under that write the verbs: “Seek and bring back”, “bind up and strengthen”, and finally “destroy.”

Then ask yourself these questions: “Who and what are we to seek and restore?” “Who and what needs healing and strengthening?” “Who and what needs changing in order to accomplish God’s justice?”

We ask the questions. We fill in the answers. We answer them in light of who Christ Church is and what our assets are. We answer them with reference to the situation of this city and this region. We answer them putting God’s grace and God’s compassion for all things first and foremost.

When all of us look at what we’ve put on this mental sheet of paper, we see how God is leading us. A common sense of mission arises from within and amongst us.

What I want to leave you with is the strong conviction that Christ Church, Detroit, has an apostolic task worthy of Sts. Peter and Paul. God calls us to feed the sheep. In the ten months I’ve been here I’ve witnessed real commitment, not just to an attractive old building but to a living legacy of apostolic mission. We don’t simply inherit a tradition, we create one. The word tradition means to hand on. We are called to hand on the work of the kingdom. Our vocation is to discover the ways God’s sheep will be fed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the wake of the death of the old industrial empire that created this city. Christ Church can be the first stirrings of the Phoenix rising from the ashes if we’re bold enough to hear and heed the words of Jesus: “Feed my sheep.” “After this he said ... ‘Follow me.’”