

Diocesan Council Sermon – February 17, 2005
South Padre Island – 101st Annual Council
The Rt. Rev. Gary Lillibridge
Propers: “Of a Missionary I”, BCP 925

As we gather for this, the 101st Council of the Diocese of West Texas, I note that we are observing a relaxed worship style this evening. I, myself, am much more relaxed for this year’s service than I was last year as I stood in the wings for my consecration.

This has been an interesting year to say the least. I knew that I was in for some new challenges and that I would encounter interesting reactions as I traveled among the congregations of our diocese. I was, and am, aware that bishops cannot please everyone. Nevertheless, I wasn’t expecting a lesson on this fact so early in my visitations, specifically my very first visitation.

I was at St. Stephen’s, Wimberley, and they had a large confirmation class (almost 40). Each candidate was invited forward, with their sponsors and family members. As I confirmed one young lady, her little brother (about four years of age) came forward and knelt down as well. After confirming the sister, the little boy held out his hands for communion. I leaned down and told him we’ll be doing communion in a few minutes. The boy must not have understood this and frowned at not receiving communion. He wasn’t leaving the communion rail willing, so his mother picked him up and they moved back to their seats. On the way back, the child yelled out for much of the congregation to hear, “That guy in the red dress is mean!”

All was not lost, however, as I learned later in the spring when I was at All Saints, Corpus Christi. As I moved around the communion rail, I put the wafer in a little boy’s hands and he whispered to me, “I’ve never seen a bishop before”. I stopped, knelt down and whispered back, “Well, what do you think?” He looked me up and down and said, “Umm, okay, I guess”. With that kind of affirmation, who wouldn’t feel special?

Such are some of the connections I’ve made this past year. Our faith is all about connections as we go about the Lord’s ministry. In the past few years, and specifically the last year and a half, much more has been made of our divisions than our connectedness. And certainly these divisions are real and they are significant. Furthermore, all indications are that they will be with us for some time to come. I imagine that all of us are growing weary of our focus on what is dividing us.

Tonight, however, as we gather as a diocese in our Lord’s Name, I want to say a few words about connectedness - because I imagine connectedness is what Christ desires we speak of. Where two or three, or even eight hundred are gathered, God will be in the midst of them. There are two specific gospel lessons I want use as my departure points.

The first is a story from the Gospel of St. John about our connections to Jesus, and through Jesus to God. (Jesus said) *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower; I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me as I abide in you; My Father is glorified by this: that you bear much fruit and become my disciples... (John 15:1ff)*

Then, tonight's gospel lesson from St. Luke: *...the Lord appointed 70 others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs...He said to them, The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest... (10:1ff)*

This gospel lesson is from the assigned readings (Propers) Of A Missionary. As Jesus prepares to send these missionaries forward, he tells them that there is an abundant harvest, but more workers are needed. Then he adds...*go on your way; see I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves...*

To be sent as lambs into the midst of wolves doesn't offer much prospect for long-term survival. As the old saying goes, the lamb and the lion might lie down together, but the lamb ain't gonna get much sleep that night...

Jesus continues...*Carry no purse, bag, sandals – don't say "hi, how's it going" to anyone on the road...From Jesus' perspective, there is a sense of urgency; haste is required in this important work. I wonder if this sense of urgency permeates the average Episcopalian; or Christian for that matter.*

Then a bit more...*Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house! Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide...do not move about from house to house...Don't hop around the neighborhood in search of the best buffet. And then...say to them, "The Kingdom of God has come near"... And, so, off they go, in pairs.*

These 70 are never mentioned by name; there is no hint that they are particularly gifted in ministry or preaching. They are given very little in the way of marching orders. They are simply to fan out over the countryside, equipped with only two things: the authority of Jesus; and their partner in ministry.

By our modern ways, the whole effort seems ridiculously under-planned and under-funded. No instructions are given on how to get on a talk show or organize a crusade; there is no advertising campaign to precede them. The 70 didn't have to attend a seminar on how to "actively listen" or "effectively engage" their "target audience". Jesus simply sends them. Why so little organization?

Because the mission of the “70” is not a campaign to be “managed”. It is an endeavor through which the power of God is to be announced. They are connected to one another for effectiveness in mission as well as mutual support. And they are connected to one another because they are first and foremost connected to Christ himself – **He** is their common bond, their common vine, whatever other differences they might have.

Most of them wouldn’t even have known each other without them knowing Christ first. How did it go? Very well, very well indeed...(v17) *The 70 returned with joy...*

Look around this room – same is true for us. Would you even know these other people if not for your common relationship, your common friendship, with Jesus Christ? Think about the fellow members of your church back home in the same way.

The Gospel, indeed the Church, is all about being connected to Jesus Christ, and through Christ to God, and one another (image of vine, vine grower, and branches). In the midst of our divisions, is it being said of us, “See how they love one another?” Is that being said of the Episcopal Church today...or for that matter, is this a general description of the state of Christianity today? See how they love one another.

Why? Because our chief witness is always who we are. As I quoted last year in our Council Bible Study, in times of great crisis the most important question is not “What happened?”...but rather, “Who Am I?”

The answer to this question is exactly what Jesus is working out in the wilderness after his baptism. He had to work on his special relationship with God, who would be the source of power and support that he would return to time and again throughout his ministry. That way, when people heard Jesus speak, those with ears to hear said, “That sounds like something God is saying”; when people saw Jesus’ deeds, those with eyes to see said, “That looks like something God is doing.”

Isn’t that our goal; our hope in ministry - that we become windows that open the world of Christ to others? Frederick Buechner uses an image I like: **“If you look at a window, you see fly-specks, dust, the crack where Junior’s frisbee hit it. If you look through a window, you see the world beyond.”** (*Wishful Thinking*, page 12)

We “clay jars” who possess an important “treasure” (2 Cor 4:7) are certainly far from perfect of course. As is true with Buechner’s analogy, if people look AT us, they will certainly see specks, dusts, cracks; our imperfections. But hopefully we’ll live in such a manner that people will be able to see THROUGH us, to God beyond.

That's the treasure of which Paul is speaking. He knew quite well that it was contained in a less than sturdy vessel (clay jar); meaning the human body. So it is doubly important to be careful (full of care) with it.

In addition to being careful with it, this treasure must be **put into action, deliberately.** We no longer have the luxury of "drifting around" in ministry, as many are wont to do. Indeed, instead of singing: "We are standing in the Light of God"; many sing something closer to, "**We are milling around in the light of Christ**". Instead of "Be Thou My Vision", it's more like, "**Be Thou My Hobby**". Instead of "I Know that My Redeemer Lives", it's "**I'm Fairly Certain That There is a Possibility That My Redeemer Might or Might Not Actually Be Alive**".

Well, come on people. We have been given a direction, a commission; an overall purpose for our life. And sad to say, the church's biggest problem is that many people in the church do not take this calling very seriously. Our chief witness should always involve living our lives in such a way that others see Christ through us.

Who wants to join a congregation adrift or afflicted with apathy? A congregation racked by controversy, ugliness, division? Nobody, that's who. We are sent as ambassadors. People who are sent are, obviously, "en route" somewhere. Your congregation needs a clear vision of where you are going. Certainly, as a National Church, we need a clear vision and well articulated mission.

Word and deed always go together in Christian witness. And as we are "en route", the word we bring is not our own. It is the word of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. As these 70 went forth, as the apostles themselves went forth, from sun up to sun down they attempted to discern how best they might follow Jesus' steps. And as they did this, they found something amazing happening in their lives. Jesus' path became their path, Jesus' focus became their focus, Jesus' cadence became their cadence.

So whether he was healing lepers in a village between Samaria and Galilee (Lk 17:11ff)...telling the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:1ff)...being anointed with an alabaster jar of perfume (Lk 7:36ff)...restoring Bartimaeus' sight in Jericho (Mk 10:46ff)...having a discussion about healing with the Syrophoenician woman in Tyre (Mk 7:24)...feeding 5000 people out in the middle of nowhere (Mt 14:13ff)...or healing the lame man at the pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1ff)...men and women began following, and they were joined to what was originally called "The Way"; later called Christianity.

If anyone to whom we are sent is to believe that there is a Kingdom of God which does in fact draw near to anyone, we who are “en route” on The Way are going to have to become willing witnesses and offer our lives in this service. It is more than a hobby. The Christian Mission is not a “plan”; it is a living thing because it lives as a possibility in us.

Don't worry about your own limitations – God takes over where your deficiencies leave off. Don't become derailed from the mission by making excuses of why you can't do it. I am reminded of the story of a young priest who was making hospital visitations during Holy Week. He visited a member of his congregation in the hospital, and she asked him for healing. This priest felt most inadequate about his ability to offer healing, and went to his mentor priest. That priest told him to go in and offer a sincere prayer with her for healing. “I don't feel comfortable doing that”, the young priest responded. “Well, it is part of your ministry, so pray for the wisdom and courage to do so,” said his mentor. “I don't know,” replied the young priest. The elder priest told him, “Take some oil with you and anoint her.” The younger priest replied, “But I can't heal anybody.” Clearly aggravated and remembering the image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on the previous Palm Sunday, the older priest shouted, “Of course you can't heal anybody, only Jesus can – but you can be the ass that he rides into the room on; now get going!”

We can make all kinds of excuses, but the simple fact is that when we accept the promises of the baptismal covenant, we accept the responsibilities of being trustees, stewards, and disciples of the treasure.

Yes, our church (and world) are in some difficult days. And, yet, if we do not regain, indeed **embrace**, our high calling to mission with **enthusiasm**, the Church will simply be “milling around” in the light of Christ.

This is a missionary service; and this is a missionary sermon. Tonight, we are here gathered; and it is important that as a diocese we are here. At times like these, we are disciples gathered at the Lord's table - just as the 12 were with Jesus on the road, beside the sea, or at table. At other times, most times, we are scattered, pursuing our common vocation (calling) in the service of Christ. Yet we are one.

To whom much has been given, much will be required. The challenge is not to stand here only with our own resources, but to nourish ourselves from the riches of God's abundant grace.

What does the future hold? I don't know. But I do know that our words and actions will impact our future in significant ways. Above all, let us – ministers of Christ, in all our trials, remember our mission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...Matthew 28:19.*

What does this mean, in terms of our daily bread? In part, it means *To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself. To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. To proclaim by word and example the Good News in Christ.* (Baptismal Covenant, prayer book, 304-305)

Word and deed always go together in Christian witness. As I said last year, let us endeavor to work on a shared vision of where the far shore is. We are leaders.

Let us be mindful of the words one of our earliest leaders, that being St. Peter:

Fellow elders, this is my plea to you: Feed the flock of God; care for it willingly, not grudgingly; not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve the Lord. Don't be tyrants, but lead them by your good example, and when the Head Shepherd comes, your reward will be a never-ending share in His glory and honor.
(1 Peter 5:2-4)

Let us remember our connectedness.

Branches. Vine. Vine Grower. Partners in Ministry. Sent together into the harvest.

Amen.