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20 Pentecost (24B)

Why Are We Here?

It has been a very good week. I spent two days at Trinity Center at a Clergy Conference. It was a beautiful place to spend some time. The Atlantic Ocean is a few steps away and nature is just at its most bountiful. I fished a little and caught three limbs, two cables and one buoy. It was like my golf game this week. Sometimes they are there and sometimes not. But all around there is a sense of creation throwing off its one season and getting ready for another.

Images of nature are those which early Christians used to describe something just as strange as the story of Jesus, but just as real in their own lives. They spoke of a powerful wind rushing through the house and entering them. They spoke of tongues of fire resting on them and transforming them. There was a new world and order and life .

One cannot express the inexplicable, except in a rush of images from the world we already know.

The lesson from Isaiah this morning is one of Holy Scripture's most powerful images of the life of Jesus. It was first an Old Testament prophecy of Israel's return from a long exile in Babylon. But the apostles and closest

followers of Jesus had seen these images of the ‘Suffering Servant’ come to life before their eyes. They were as puzzled by the resurrection as they had been by much of what Jesus had been saying to them. What’s next? They were unsure of God’s next step. Some went back to their fishing. Was Israel’s old dream going to come true? Were all of their hopes to be fulfilled?

Jesus did not answer them directly. Surprise! Many of the questions we ask God cannot be answered directly, not because God doesn’t know the answers but because our questions do not make sense. As C.S.Lewis once pointed out, many of our questions are, from God’s point of view, rather like someone asking, “Is yellow square or round?” or “How many hours are there in a mile?” Jesus said in Acts chapter one that they would have to wait for the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and the task of the Church walk hand in hand. We cannot talk about them apart. God does not give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disney World. Of course, if you are despairing in life the fresh wind of God’s Spirit can and often does give you a new perspective on everything and importantly grants a sense of God’s presence, love, comfort, and even joy. But the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news

that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up, and that we are to help make it happen. The Holy Spirit calls us to a life unlike our everyday secular walk.

You are a Christian or want to be. In your baptism you are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is given to you to begin the work of making God's future real in the present. This Spirit turns your life upside down and changes the priorities of your life. It makes passages like Isaiah chapter 53 real and challenging . The Spirit comes to us from a world waiting to be born. The old prophets talked of it in terms of peace and justice flourishing and the wolf and lamb lying down together side by side. One key element of living as a Christian is learning to live with the life, and by the rules, of God's future world, even as we are continuing to live within the present one, the one to which Jesus refers to as "*this corrupt and sinful generation.*" How do we make this world more like His world?

St. Francis of Assisi said it best: "**Preach the gospel always; and when necessary, use words.**" We live in such a way that God's Holy Spirit directs and guides our life and it is a visible reality to those who see us. The Church is frequently in a position to talk with people about the values and ideals of their faith. We give more than we get. We live lives of 'charity.'

Thomas Aquinas taught that “Charity is included in the definition of every virtue, because every virtue depends on it in a way...”

In Article 21 of the Mennonite Confession of Faith these words are a call to life:

As servants of God, our primary vocation is to be stewards in God’s household. God, who in Christ has given us new life, has also given us spiritual gifts to use for the Church’s nurture and mission...We believe that time also belongs to God and that we are to use with care the time of which we are stewards...We acknowledge that God as Creator is owner of all things....The first church in Jerusalem put Jubilee into practice by preaching the gospel, healing the sick and sharing possessions. ...As stewards of money and possessions, we are to live simply, practice mutual aid within the church, uphold economic justice and give generously and cheerfully...We are called to be stewards in the household of God, set apart for the service of God...”

Will we allow the Spirit of God to work in us a good thing? Will we follow God’s leading in the use of our time, talent and treasure? The standard is the ‘tithes’, 10% and in Genesis chapter 28 Jacob says “...*and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you [God].*” In Leviticus God says to Moses, “*All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes*

under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to the Lord..." (Lev. 27:32-34) We are quick to site Leviticus in our current church debates but do we follow all of this demanding word? Malachi says, not just 10% but the '*first fruits*', the best of a household's income and possessions. Is the Holy Spirit moving in you to give the very best to God? Our 21st century filter systems squelch this pretty well don't they.

Today is a day when I remind you about your Stewardship for your life and this parish church. Historically Stewardship is described as:

The proper and generous use of our time, talent and treasure

It is all that we do with our lives after our baptism promises

It is about joyfully returning to God a portion of that bounty

that God has bestowed upon us.

But lets remember also what Stewardship is NOT. It is not about duty, responsibility or financial giving. It is not about who gives most for their personal recognition. Neither is Stewardship disconnected from how we live as Christians. Stewardship is not about giving time without treasure; treasure without talent; talent without time; nor any other combination --- but rather, the triune and complete use of all three aspects of time, talent and treasure for the glory of God.

Stewardship is so intrinsically part of our vocation as Christians that we cannot place it above or below prayer --- but essentially with it. Our acts of charity are a prayer for humanity. We give in gratitude and therefore praise God. It can be said that our vocation as Christians is based in our faith, and expressed through our acts of Stewardship. A good steward is mindful , always, of time, talent and treasure, and uses all three to engage in prayer, worship, acts of charity, mercy, kindness, humility, and love, sustaining them all by embracing Stewardship.

We live in such a prosperous time and in such a prosperous country that Stewardship of ‘what is left over after I do what I want to do’ may seem like a tidy sum. But we are not talking about ‘sums’ here but rather we are talking about your heart, your soul, your very faith in the God who created and sustains you. Is He first in your life? If so let us change our world in His Name through our generosity to the needs of His world.

You see, what matters is generosity. A good steward understands his or her wealth as gift and shares it proportionately. That means that even the poorest of the poor can be a good steward. Like the widow of St. Mark’s Gospel, with the mite that was “all she had to live on”(Mk. 12:41-44), good stewards are impelled to give from the well of their deep desire. Poor

stewards, by contrast, are more concerned with the dollar amount, recognition, and what might be gained in return for their gift.

The truth is that the vision the Lord gives us is always bigger than the resources we have. But we are those called to be the Church and we have great work to do for God, here in this place. We are to dream big dreams about goals beyond the world's capacity for they are God's dreams as well. While the gifts we give will never save us, our acts of Stewardship, in so far as they are in keeping with God's plan for humanity, do offer us the dignity of participating in God's plan of redemption.

Stewardship is not the by-product of a committee meeting or a fundraising campaign, nor even of the Sunday sermon. Stewardship is a relationship with God that both receives and gives, making all things possible. Christian Stewards recognize their gifts, contemplate all that is in their lives, and devote themselves daily to the conviction that they, as Christians, are invited into a state of duality: as a child of God, the Christian is gift, and as Steward, giver. Life as a steward, contained in the covenant of our baptismal promises, and embodied in the daily journey of our lives, is intrinsic to our Christian discipleship.

So, why ARE you here? You are here to accomplish for God what He needs for you/us to accomplish. Pray that your gift will measure up to God's

giving to you. Let us exhibit in our Stewardship in this place the joy and wonder that a loving God has shared with us. We are indeed blessed beyond our knowing. Amen.