

A Sermon for Third Sunday after the Epiphany – January 24, 2016

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond , Virginia

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(A sermon not delivered as services were cancelled because of a snowstorm)

Send us your Spirit, God, to open our hearts and our minds to your Word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the life of Jesus as Jesus steps forth into his public ministry. In this passage we see how even Jesus is not self sufficient. He is dependent upon God for his life, his faith, as well as for the guidance he will need for his mission and ministry. Two Sundays ago we heard in the Gospel reading about Jesus' baptism. Then after his baptism he was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. The Holy Spirit was with him and presented with each temptation, Jesus refused to go down any of the possible directions that would be the wrong choices for his ministry. Our gospel today finds Jesus returning to Galilee where the Holy Spirit gave him the power he needed for his ministry. He stood up and read a text that would be his mission statement. As he stood up to read, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written" The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed

go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke wants us to know in no uncertain terms that it is the Holy Spirit who lead Jesus in saying no to false options in the temptation story and saying yes to a mission that is given to him by God. Jesus read these passages from the prophet Isaiah to make it clear who he was and what he was called to be and do. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from oppression those who were poor, those were relegated to the margins of the society in which they lived, those who in any way were imprisoned, those who were victims of economic structures that held them down in any way.

Initially as report about him spread throughout the surrounding country he was praised by everyone, but as we would soon find out his challenge to the way things were would lead to fierce opposition and eventually he would be crucified. For us even, truly to understand Christ's mission, and therefore the Church's mission presents a challenge. It is threatening to contemplate the turning upside down of economic structures from which you and I benefit. It can be threatening to have to come to terms with the notion that God may be calling us to look at things in a new light. It can be unsettling to think that the Holy Spirit is calling us change our ways, yet we must remember that Jesus' focus was upon bring healing into this world. For us a Christians, it is essential that our understanding of our individual mission be shaped and formed as best we possibly can by Jesus' understanding of his mission. For the Church which bears his name, it is essential that our understanding of its mission be shaped and formed as best it possibly can by Jesus' mission. As Jesus' mission was to bring healing and

justice, is not that our mission as well as his followers? Is that not the mission of the Church as well?

Sometimes we wonder: You most likely have read or seen in the news media, about the recent gathering of Anglican primates at Canterbury, England in which resulted in calling for the exclusion of the Episcopal Church from Anglican dialogues and committees. I would encourage you to go to our diocesan website or the Episcopal news Service site on the internet for correct information as the secular media is not always balanced or even accurate. I must confess to you that the statement from the Primates of the Anglican Communion at this gathering has been much on my mind. I am a life-long Episcopalian. My Grandfather, Franklin Knight, was an Episcopal priest. His wife, Gertrude Mosher, was a missionary to China before they were married. Her brother, Gouvenor Mosher, was Bishop of the Philippines. My family has long been active in the Episcopal Church. Part of the reason I have believed in our place as Episcopalians in the wider Anglican Communion has been as a result of a world-wide view my family has maintained regarding the mission of the church as part of that wider communion. But now, however, I'm not sure how to stand gracefully before you and address the level of disappointment that I experience, as do others, hearing that a group of archbishops from another culture, have essentially said to us as Episcopalians, "Go to your room for three years. You've been bad. You're in time out." I now find myself asking, "What is more important, walking with fellow Anglicans who come from a culture where homosexuality is punishable by death and who do not rise up in opposition to such an atrocity, fellow Anglicans who oppose the

ordination of women, and who do not want to have anything to do with us as Episcopalians and want us out of their dialogue while they decide whether we are in or out—or standing by our commitment in the Episcopal Church to respect the dignity of every human being and to follow what we have come to believe is the movement of the Holy Spirit in being an inclusive church as we have tried to do? The other day, my sister sent me a copy of the statement issued by the bishop of Vermont, Thomas Ely. I share his concerns. In his statement he said, “For me, sadness and disappointment are the overwhelming feelings in my heart as I read and ponder the statement from this week’s gathering in Canterbury. I find it especially disappointing to read that the principle offering from a meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the spirit of reconciliation includes what comes across to me as a rebuke of one member of the Anglican family, the Episcopal Church. It is even more poignant to read this response as we prepare for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity next week—the week between the great Feast Days of the Confession of Saint Peter and the Conversion of Saint Paul. I was hoping for something better.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury himself has said that a formal schism in the Anglican Communion would be a failure but not a disaster because “God is bigger than our failures.” “It would not be good, however,” he said, “if the Church is unable to set an example of showing how we can love one another and disagree profoundly, because we are brought together by Jesus Christ, not by our own choice.” Archbishop Welby said that he wanted reconciliation and that “reconciliation doesn’t always mean

agreement. In fact, it very seldom does. It means finding ways of disagreeing well and that is what we have got to do . . .”

Today’s reading from Paul’s 1st letter to the church gathered in Corinth illustrates in words we cannot ignore our mutual dependence upon one another when he says, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you” Each, Paul insists, is equally indispensable. All of us in the Anglican Communion are indispensable to one another. I confess that I wonder, “Where in the minds and hearts of those primates was the presence of the Holy Spirit?”

The same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism is the same Holy Spirit that has descend upon each of us and upon the Church over the ages. It is a spirit that calls us to a higher level of loving and living and giving. To those who observe our church from the outside we wonder, what must they often be thinking? What kind of message are we giving by our schisms and divisions? How can we possibly make Christ known to this broken world when we cannot be reconciled in our own Communion?

And so, we must pray for reconciliation in our Anglican Communion as we pray for reconciliation wherever there are unhappy divisions. We pray that the Holy Spirit will take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord. Pray we must, yet without a change of heart prayer is in vain.

As Jesus' mission was to bring healing and justice. Is not that our mission as well as his followers? Is that not the mission of the Church as well? We cannot control or even influence what happens in our Anglican Communion much beyond our fervent prayers for reconciliation, yet we can control as best we can how we strive to be agents of reconciliation ourselves in our own spheres of where we live and where our lives touch the lives of others.

How do we as the body of Christ here in this parish—in our present day, and in this place from which God is calling us to go forth—how do we bring the good news of the Gospel to others? How do we by example and by word and in action, bring hope to others? Ever before us is the challenge and the opportunity, How do we proclaim the Gospel and promote justice, peace, and love? A fearful and anxious world out there awaits an answer from the Church—from us—the body of Christ.