

Sermon for November 15, 2009: The 24th Sunday after Pentecost

One day, I will retire from full-time ordained ministry.

I'll turn my church keys in, go to my last vestry meeting, receive my last bit of undeserved praise and the last unfair complaint.

And the first Sunday afterward, I will wake up with the usual hurried, somewhat anxious feeling of a preaching Sunday and then remember, "Oh no, I don't have to be there. No one is counting on me."

And then I'll know what it is like to be a disciple of Jesus without title, position, and salary. I hope I can handle it and that I will still get up and go to church.

I know clergy who have retired two, three, and four times. It is hard for me to believe in the midst of a busy stretch, but there are retired clergy who cannot stand to sit in a pew; who cannot bear anyone's sermon but their own; who tell me they feel utterly lost without the structure and purpose of ordained ministry.

And some of them say they cannot go to church if they are not leading worship, at least for a season.

What we clergy learn when we retire is that religion in the post-modern world is voluntary; that it takes some great effort to get up on Sunday morning, one of your few days of freedom.

There was a time in American society when everybody in your neighborhood left for church on Sunday morning; it was a necessary marker of respectability.

Not so now. Coming to church is an increasingly counter-cultural proposition.

It takes some effort to prepare yourself and children to be here, to be surrounded by people who are not necessarily much like you.

Saturday keeps us out of church on Sunday. We are up against that late SEC football game on ESPN2, soccer games, and weekend trips.

And though church is hardly the radically open and deep community we wish for, it is a place different from the places of shopping, work, and pleasure where we so often manage to hang out with people who are very, very much like us.

Church requires us to embrace a somewhat wider slice of the human community than other parts of our experience.

And church does not offer a consumer experience tailored to your needs in the same Walmart or Woodruff Road seek to do.

Here we ask you come to an old building that is sometimes hot and sometimes cold,

to sit in pews are different from your easy chair.

And the message you hear here diverges, greatly, I hope, from the message of the television set, the politicians, and the consumer society.

The quality of your experience here is certainly uneven. Some weeks the preaching and music and spirit are high; some weeks we seem just to be getting a job done.

It is hard to hit a home run 52 times a year.

So, it is not easy to get up and come to church, I know, and I know I'll know it even better when I retire.

In the lessons today are dire predictions of coming suffering, of great tribulation, wars and rumors of wars, on the way to our final redemption.

I imagine you come to church most weeks hoping for a more promising and gentle part of the Gospel's hope.

Thankfully, we do not often use fear to get you into church in the Episcopal Church.

Fearfulness about the end does get some people to church, mostly in other denominations. Fearfulness generally is frequently used by organized

religion.

Ministers tell you to come to church because you fear God's judgment, because you fear social shame; some churches bond by getting together to denounce those whom they fear and loathe who are not like them.

But this is not a strategy for evangelism and church growth we will employ.

No, it is the odd lesson out today, the one not about wars and eschatological terror, that captures the best reason to overcome those barriers and hindrances that would keep you at home on Sunday morning.

Hebrews is more of a sermon than a letter, a sermon to a church in situation much like ours.

The church that read this letter was a tiny movement in the vastness of Roman society, a society that was alternately indifferent and hostile to the Christian movement.

It was not easy to get them to church; there were few social incentives for doing so.

And like us, some, perhaps many in that church heard lessons like ours from Daniel and Mark today and were not comforted; some wondered how long the Lord had delayed and if indeed he would ever return.

And so many drifted away, seeking instead the comforts of their own society and culture.

And the writer of Hebrews wanted to win them back, to get them back in church, not for announcements or programs or fund raising, any of the other things we dangerously do in church.

The writer of Hebrews wanted them back for the pure worship of the Resurrected Lord Jesus and to provoke one another to good deeds.

Hebrews makes the argument that Jesus is a great high priest, something on the model of the high priest of the Hebrews who offered the sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple.

And yet, he is different, the book insists, for his sacrifice was of himself, a single and perfect sacrifice offered once for all, a single offering perfecting all the sanctified for ever.

That is the reason, Hebrews says, to meet together, to give thanks for the tremendous mercy of God known in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our God has done praise-worthy things; we have received a gift of incalculable value; salvation has been given us!

So, says the Hebrews preacher and this preacher, don't let bad preaching or weather or the wonderful weirdness of the church community keep you away.

Worshiping a God worthy of worship is the basic reason we do not neglect to gather together, but Hebrews names another purpose, encouraging one another and provoking one another to good deeds.

"Provocation" usually has some negative connotations.

In the liturgy of the church, provocation is a good thing; it is provocation to the Christian life and to the work of Christians, to the spreading of the Gospel by word and deed, to the treasuring of life, to the making of peace and justice and the sharing of hope.

So our praise assembly also has a moral, ethical dimension.

We cannot speak about the grace and power of God without asking what we must do, how we must be in response.

As we gather Sunday by Sunday to praise the God who saved us in Jesus, we tell a story that demands a response.

This is a provocative gathering; and I am so thankful that I am not the only provoker.

I see people asking others to serve; asking others to give.

I saw last week a brand new member of the church volunteer to pick up a long time member for Sunday worship.

I saw last week a member, soon to be 80 himself, volunteer to pick up a member 13 years his senior.

I see so many of you giving yourselves away to the causes the Lord loves; feeding the hungry, tending the sick, sharing the good news.

I know it can be hard to get to church, but it is well worth it.

In the long run, what we have here is a treasure of inestimable worth; an encounter with Jesus Christ and those who serve him, a provocative, powerful hour in which our praise of him shapes our very being into a new creation.