

PENTECOST III – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Today is one of those days when a whole lot of personal thoughts are swirling in my head. Not only is it Nancy Coleman's birthday, but it is also the anniversary of my mother's as well. The first lesson is about Elijah, which happens to be the name we chose for our first poodle, who was something of a prophet and also a healer. More on that lesson from First Kings in a moment.

Tuesday, June 28th, St. Irenaeus' day, is the 80th anniversary of my baptism, the 52nd anniversary of my ordination to the diaconate, and the anniversary of the adoption of our son fifty years ago. Lots of memories; a lot to celebrate.

We celebrate, too, this last Eucharist I shall preside over with you, an event that is what we sometimes call "bittersweet." There is a hint of bitterness, or better yet, sadness, in that it means saying "farewell," yet sweetness, too, in that we have come to a very sweet relationship together. It has certainly been that for me, and so many of you have been kind enough to say that it has been for you, also. God has given us good work to do, hard work, to be sure, for it is never easy to do a lot of introspection, to face our own faults and limitations, to put them into perspective, to ask for and grant forgiveness. You have worked so very hard, and I have the deepest respect for you as individuals and as a community. My work among you is finished, and I thank God for that and for you.

An aside: when I was a young priest in Nashville, a couple of seminary classmates had become assistants at a big parish near the one where I

was serving. One day they described their rector as a priest who was extremely good at conflict resolution. He had come to the parish and helped them to work through a particular conflict. But, according to them, that was his one big gift; he did not seem to know what else to do in ministry. And so, every once in a while, when things were going rather smoothly in the parish, he would preach a sermon that would infuriate half of the congregation and stir up another conflict, so that he could again step in to rescue them. I am not sure why the congregation missed making the connection that he was playing this in two directions. It certainly helped me to learn when to let go.

You probably know very well that we clergy can fall in love with a congregation and our ministry within it, just as we humans can fall in love with another person and our relationship. But we also need to know when to let go, when the pastoral relationship may become more important for our own sakes than for the good of the congregation. When we are called into a certain ministry, we need to be very clear that it is God who wants us to be there—not our personal need to be near aging parents (or something similar), and not because some very nice people want us to be there. We try to discern why God wants us to serve there, and that usually will involve some very hard work and helping a community through some kind of challenging situation and/or decision. We often only catch a glimpse of that during the search process, but there are events in the ensuing years when it all becomes clear. Usually that is when we have lived through something particularly painful and challenging and the Spirit has brought us to a new place. In reflecting on such a time, we realize, “That’s why I was called to be here.” Then we go on. We may be called to stay longer, into the next steps of mission and ministry, or it may be over; that is our next discernment as a priest.

We see that in today's lesson from I Kings. Elijah has been serving God faithfully for some time. We do not know how old he is, whether he is tired and worn out or not, but he hears God telling him to find his successor and even specifically whom to choose, Elisha. He learns that his time of mission and ministry is nearing an end, but that the work needs to be carried on. And so, we hear and see Elisha's call and the beginning of Elisha's apprenticeship.

Jesus, too, is calling more followers. The first man he calls is full of enthusiasm and ready to follow anywhere, and Jesus feels the need to warn him: "This work does not come with security and safety; it is full of risks, and you don't know where you will wind up." The second man sets a condition: "Let me bury my father first," but Jesus tells him that now is the time to go and get busy with the work of proclamation. He is saying more: "do not let yourself be bound and burdened by the past; your call is not to serve the dead, but the living." When the third man tells Jesus he wants to go and say good-bye to his family, even that is too much for Jesus. He uses a strange image: if you put your hand to the plow and then look back you are not fit to serve. He is saying, if you do that and look back, what kind of a row do you think you will plow? You will probably end up going in a circle, back to where you started. That's bad enough if one is plowing, but what if one is being chased by a tiger? If you look back when you are running away, you're going to run into something else, perhaps a tree, perhaps a tiger. In either case, you will be done for, you will be lunch.

There seems to be a parallel here with Elisha, for he does go back to his oxen, and he does provide for his family, but there is a different dimension to it; he is not going back to continue and finish his plowing. Elisha returns to his people to literally close down his earlier life, killing the oxen and sharing the bountiful meal with his family and neighbors as a farewell.

I think there are a couple of things to pay attention to here, the first being not to get caught up in any nostalgia for the past. There was no golden age that you here at St. Matthias are being called to recreate. You learned that for sure as we looked at the past two rectorships, which included strengths and weaknesses, not just within the two clergy, but within your community. Nothing was perfect. No matter how hard the Spirit worked among you, what you built together was full of the flaws of human limitations. That is not a judgment nor a criticism, for we humans are always limited no matter how hard we try. So we give thanks for what is good, for what works, for what brings joy and gives life, and we keep trying to learn and to do what might be better—in God’s eyes, not our own. If and when we don’t learn, we make the same mistakes again and again.

Let me give you another story from my life and then apply it to us. Many years ago, I heard the great tenor Luciano Pavirotti give a recital. It was superb, and when he stopped for his final bows, he held up his arms, his ever-present handkerchief flopping in one hand, and with a grin on his face. He, too, was in awe of what had just happened, and I went home thinking that this man, with a stupendous gift of a glorious voice, had never forgotten that this was a gift, not of his own doing nor of his own possession. Sure, he had honed the gift with countless hours of training and rehearsing, but it was God’s gift to him to give away to the world.

Many of you have been very kind and generous and showered me with compliments for the work I have done among you, and I have to admit that I have trouble receiving that kindness from you. Whatever I do is God’s gift to me—it is always that or I would not find so much enjoyment and meaning in what I do—and it is most especially a gift for me to give away so that something good may come of it.

So, thank you for your thanks, but may I say, please give that thanks to God, because the gifts have always had a purpose and a direction. I do know this is real from three ways that I measure what is going on:

- 1) Comments from some of you who have been here regularly through this time who say, "We feel like ourselves again;"
- 2) Comments from those of you who are away during the winter and have returned these two summers saying, "There's such a difference in the spirit of the parish;" and
- 3) Comments from visitors and newcomers who say, "This is such a warm and welcoming place."

Thanks be to God! You are very healthy indeed!

I want to end with one very strong recommendation, which I believe will be helpful to your excellent Wardens and Vestry:

There are three clergy among us who have stepped in over this time when I am not here, and have continued to do wonderful work as members of the parish during this time. I know you have granted them spiritual authority, for you talk about their preaching and conversations you have had with them that have greatly benefitted your lives. How I treasure their being with and among us, and I have sought during this time to consult with them and to keep them abreast of what is happening among us. My concern is that they do not have any authority for oversight, as I have had as your Interim Rector. I would like you to grant that authority, if not in some formal way, then in your hearts, because each and all of them are people who know to look for the common good and to work for it among us. They are not into control, but servanthood, and what more can you ask than that?

I want to share one more learning that I had when I was a bishop. There are times when a bishop has raw power, not just authority, and can simply say, “we are going to do it this way.” Now The Episcopal Church does not give raw power and authority away lightly, knowing that we bishops never stop being flawed human beings with egos and willfulness. What I learned about power was this: I only had it to exercise for the sake of avoiding further or deeper harm. Not to do what I wanted to do in any way, but to avoid further harm in and to the Church as I serve and served it.

Served. We are back to servanthood, aren't we? And that is what you can trust these men to bring and to offer in any authority you bestow upon them. With the wonderful Vestry you have, and the shepherding of these men, you are in good hands. Be grateful and be not afraid!

Amen.

+JJJ