

**Church of the Holy Spirit**  
**Sermon by the Rev. Canon Randolph K. Dales**  
**Proper 24B 18 October 2015**

It is an honor and a privilege to find myself as a part of the people of the Church of the Holy Spirit this morning. And I need to say at the outset how humbled I am by Bishop Hirschfeld's request that I become your Priest-in-Charge, as well as how thankful I am for your Vestry's willingness to join enthusiastically in this new relationship.

Over the past three years of retirement, when I have been asked to supply at different churches, I've found it difficult to decide just how to preach to a congregation with whom you are not familiar. You have no idea in that situation, to whom you are speaking. And although I've been here twice in the last year, it will take some time for us to get to know one another.

Thus I am reminded of a cartoon I once saw in the New Yorker magazine- a cartoon that pictured a clergyman standing in the pulpit beginning his sermon. From the caption, we hear him say, "any resemblance between the sinners referred to in this sermon and those in the congregation is purely coincidental." And so it is today.

Our readings for this day started with a continuation of the story of Job begun two weeks ago, and which conclude next Sunday. Despite the public perception of Job as a model of patience, he is much more a model defiance and persistence in times of calamity. Having suffered the loss of family and fortune and beset with physical ails, Job is mostly tormented by his friends, who come to him preaching that suffering is the result of God's punishing him for some bad behavior of which no one is aware. This, clearly inaccurate theology, Job refuses to accept, and he demands that God answer for the injustice of his innocent suffering.

Today's reading has God's reply, which rather than explaining why suffering exists, centers on God's questions for Job. Speaking out of the whirlwind, a symbol of God's power of creation, the Almighty asks Job: "*Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.*" Tell me, if you understand the majesty of creation and where you were when the stars begin to shine.

God's words here are hardly satisfying to the modern ear, which seeks to hear a clear and unambiguous answer to the problem of why there is suffering. But the response is satisfying to Job, as he realizes that God is present in his life, that God is present in all suffering – even if Job (and we) never fully understand the sufferings of this world. No, the message for us is that God is not absent, but very present in the calamities of those around us, and that is where we are called to be as well.

In today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus and the disciples are on the very threshold of Jerusalem and the events that will lead Jesus through Holy Week to the cross. And during their travels, Jesus has been attempting to prepare his disciples for what is to come and what that will mean for them.

But once again, it is obvious that they just don't get it. Three Sundays ago, we learned that the disciples had been arguing along the way over which of them was the greatest, and now, once again, James and John, two of the first followers, two leaders of the band, ask Jesus for places of prominence in the coming kingdom.

Putting personal ambition ahead of solidarity in the community, these two were thinking of the Kingdom of God in terms of a career ladder, assuming that they would be in places of power, something akin to the religious leaders of their day.

The impudence of these two, and their obvious lack of understanding, is almost beyond belief. How could two people have been so close to Jesus and yet miss the boat so completely? And their request angers their fellow disciples. But what really seems to irk the others is not so much that James and John have misunderstood Jesus' teaching, but that these two went to Jesus requesting a place of power ahead of the rest. The other disciples aren't acting out of righteous indignation. Rather, it appears that they are jealous.

The behavior of these two is so embarrassing, that in Matthew's gospel, the story is changed to have their mother making the request.

Jesus' loving response to them all is to show them the contrast between earthly greatness and greatness in kingdom living – the greatness that comes from being the servants of others.

*“Do you know what you're asking? Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”* To “*drink the cup*” is a metaphor for suffering. And their willingness to do so is an indication that they two will one day share in Jesus' suffering. But to ask for places of honor is to follow the way of the world, not the way of Jesus.

Jesus says to them all, *“you know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you.”* It would have been clearly untasteful for a Jewish person to have been compared to the ways of Gentile society, but Jesus means to make it absolutely clear that their discipleship and their subsequent leadership must be characterized by actions and attitudes completely different from the world around them.

In a society that prizes power, status, and honor (whether that be in the first century or the twenty-first) the call of Jesus is to follow a different path. For the heart of discipleship is service, not privilege. And the person who turns out to be great will be the one who takes the roles of a servant, providing for the needs and welfare of others, especially those who are suffering all around us.

James and John left the nets of their father's business when they first chose to follow Jesus. But the nets of the desire for personal prestige and glory are still the nets they had failed to let go.

An 18<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop of Canterbury (Thomas Seeker) once said God has three sorts of servants in the world:

- “some are slaves – and serve him from fear;
- some are hirelings – and serve for wages; and
- the last are sons (and daughters) – who serve because they love.”

Speaking of archbishops, Lynn and I were fortunate enough to hear the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, preach last week at the dedication of the new chapel at Virginia Seminary. At one point in his sermon, the archbishop referenced A.A. Milne's books about Winnie the Pooh. And he justified this by quoting his predecessor, Rowan Williams, who said “There is almost no situation on earth which cannot be explained with the hermeneutical tool of Winnie the Pooh.”

Archbishop Welby spoke of the time when Winnie the Pooh tried to ride to safety from a flood by sitting on the top of a pot of honey. And as Milne put it, “sometimes Pooh was on the honey pot and sometimes the honey pot was on Pooh”. The archbishop went on to say that church “buildings can be like that. Sometimes they are the servants of the Church, and sometimes they are on top, her tyrant.” He was talking about the incredible cost of our buildings' upkeep and maintenance [remember, most of the churches in England were built over a thousand years ago]. And so it is with many of our churches here. But that's not unique to our time.

On my first day this week at the Community Life Center, I stumbled across a copy of Samuel Abbott's history of the first fifty years of the Church of the Holy Spirit. It was written some forty plus years ago, and it describes the first services in this building in the spring of 1924 (seventy-one years ago). Those Episcopalians, who had been worshipping in the Holderness Chapel, were few in number. But they borrowed money from Bishop Parker to buy this building, which was built in 1884 as a Universalist Church, but had been unused for some twenty years. After cleaning it out (with the help of some Holderness students) the little congregation struggled for years to pay their mortgage, with an average Sunday attendance of about twenty people that year. But their perseverance established a ministry to the greater Plymouth area that continues to this day (and like Pooh, some times with them on top, and sometimes the church building feeling like it was on top of them).

Last month, Bishop Hirschfeld preached at the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of our diocese's churches, and he chose for his text the story of Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus says "*My house shall be called a house of prayer*" *but you are making it a den of robbers.*" [not what I might choose for a celebratory occasion]. But our bishop's message to that congregation, and what Jesus was saying to the good church folk of his day, also applies to us: This building is not OUR church! This building is not YOUR church, or MINE. It is GOD's!

And, as one of the Eucharistic prayers says, we cannot come here "*for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.*" No, we come here to be fed and forgiven, to be nourished and renewed, in order that we can go out from here empowered to seek and serve those who are suffering around us.

Another archbishop, William Temple, famously said "*The Church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.*" And that is just as true for the Church of the Holy Spirit as it is for the whole church. The measure of our greatness will not be in how many members we have or how many years this parish has been in existence, but instead how well we have learned to serve those outside these walls.

One of the great lay members of the Episcopal Church, a woman named Verna Dozier wrote [in *The Dream of God*] that our "call to ministry is the call to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God in a new way, the daring, free, accepting, compassionate way Jesus modeled. It means being bound by no yesterday, fearing no tomorrow, drawing no lines between friend and foe, the acceptable ones and the outcasts... (For) the world is not as God would have it to be. The kingdoms of this world are not yet the kingdom of God, but they can become it."

At one of the congregations I once served, a woman came up to me at a reception following a funeral. She was not a member of the parish, but she recognized in that congregation something unlike what she had experienced in other churches in the past. She observed that that parish was made up of people who came there to enjoy worship and fellowship in order to go out and to serve the larger community. The people she met in that church didn't come so much for their own needs, but rather to be strengthened for service to others.

I think her comments and those of Ms. Dozier summarize well the message from today's scripture.

- We come here acknowledging God's presence in our world – especially present with those who suffer.
- We come here to be fed and strengthened, seeking to find ways of living that are different from the ways of much of the world around us.
- We come here because we know that we are profoundly loved and need never be afraid, joining together with others, happy to be around others who seek to find themselves among the servants of the Servant of God.

Amen.