

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
August 1, 2010
X Pentecost (Proper 13, Year C), Luke 12:13-21

*Dear God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us.
Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength;
for pardon only, and not for renewal. Amen.*

Why are you here?

Why did you get up early on a Sunday morning and shave when you didn't have to shave, dress when you didn't have to dress, even wrestle the kiddos to tuck in their shirttails and then haul everybody down to the corner of Windsor and Exposition? Why are you here? Why are *we* here?

With all due respect to the foot traffic on the Greenbelt and the line at Kerbey Lane Café, in the language of Saint Paul, we are here to seek “the things that are above, where Christ is” (Colossians 3:1). We gather as the people of God to have our chins raised: not for pride, but for perspective. Yes, we come for Peace – confessing, blessing, praying, singing, eating, drinking – but more than these, we come for transformation. We are here to become the New Creation, and all of our varied situations and intentions serve that holy vision. *We are here to become the New Creation*: to be transformed in the image of God and to share in the inauguration of God's reign. Friends, we are here to be changed, and we are here to change the world...nothing less.

Today we embark on a six-week exploration of our worship, considering in more or less chronological order, the form of our Eucharistic liturgy. Our worship begins in conversation about the God who would transform us and transform the world: “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” I say; “And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever,” you reply. Declaring the goodness of the Lord, we then, collectively, turn to that good God – “from whom no secrets are hid” – and we ask for clarity of heart and mind. We keep this rhythm, continuing our conversation – “The Lord be with you,” I say; “And also with you,” you reply – before again turning toward God and “collecting” ourselves and our petitions in the Collect of the Day: “...through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever,” and then we listen (“Holy Eucharist, Rite II,” *Book of Common Prayer*).

Unlike many non-liturgical churches, we follow a three-year cycle of prescribed readings, saving all of us from hearing every Sunday only the preacher's favorite verses and sugar stick sermons. Customarily, we will read aloud a lesson from the Old Testament; a Psalm; a lesson from one of the New Testament epistles; and a lesson from one of the four, canonical Gospels. Of these, only the Gospel lesson is required for Eucharistic worship, and in all of the lessons we hear stories of history and prophecy; of weeping and singing; of fall and redemption.

The tradition of reading from scripture sets our lives in conversation with the lives of God's people who, in faith, have preceded us. Consider that upon the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem following the rebuilding of the Temple and the Temple walls in the sixth century

before the birth of Christ, “all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate...They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it...from early morning until midday...and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose...And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen” (Nehemiah 8:1-6).

Thereafter, “the Levites helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people [could understand] the reading” (Nehemiah 8:7-8). All of this as recorded in the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah, composed some two-and-a-half millennia ago, and so still we hear from scripture and we hear the wisdom of our faith story, set in our contemporary context, whatever and whenever that context might be.

We are here to become the New Creation: to be transformed in the image of God and to share in the inauguration of God’s reign.

“Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me’” (Luke 12:13). I suspect the man who approaches Jesus believes the teacher will speak in his favor. Moses presided over a similar request, as recorded in the Book of Numbers, when five daughters made appeal to him to keep their father’s name and a portion of his property, rather than have his entire estate succeed to their uncles. In the absence of a brother, their concern was not for greed, but for survival, and Moses granted their request. However, Jesus discerns that this man is not asking for sustenance, but for extravagance. In response, Jesus rebukes him and tells a story of a rich man who had more than he needed. Jesus explains that the land of the rich man had produced abundantly, and so the man decided to pull down his barns and build larger ones in order to store all of his grain and all of his goods. And God called him a fool.

How often do we come before this, the table of the Lord, seeking solace only, and not strength; pardon only, and not renewal? How often do we come here to make a barn of this building, seeking to store our goods and our grain, hearing only affirmation of our life and our style?

Yes: we should surely find Peace when we gather in this place, this space which has been set aside from our harried, busy world. And just as surely, if we come to worship *only* for comfort, only to hear endorsement of the convictions we carry already, seeking to hear: “Soul, you have ample [righteousness] laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” – then we have set our minds “on things that are on earth” (Luke 12:19, Colossians 3:2). In our consumer culture there is pressure on our parishes to please, but our integrity as Christians depends upon our desire not to be comforted in our foolishness, but to be “renewed in the image of our creator” (Colossians 3:10). We should encounter the heart of the Gospel in our worship, a force experienced in the power of provocation, and not in pleasure.

Every Thursday morning I share a conference call with two of my seminary classmates. We have kept the discipline of these phone calls since graduation, and we share with one another what is happening in our respective ministries. One of these guys serves as rector of a large, downtown parish in Virginia, and he has begun to develop an aid for charting a congregation's identity along a continuum. One end of this continuum he names the "Community of Memory." The other end he names the "Community of Expectation." He proposes that most mainline denominational churches can be plotted toward the former. These congregations speak often of the "good ol' days," and their formational programming focuses on the maintenance of tradition. These congregations resist change, and rather than friendly churches, these are churches of friends: cliquish, closed communities that do not incorporate newcomers effectively. Implicitly or explicitly, these communities believe their best days are behind them. On the other end of the continuum, he plots the non-denominational, "store-front" churches that have no history and so constantly look forward, believing their best days are always ahead of them. These churches are open, and newcomers find many opportunities to become integrally involved in the life of these missionary communities.

Now, with the best gifts of these two poles working cooperatively, a "Community of Transformation" can develop. The Community of Transformation seeks to renew what has grown tired, honoring its past while holding meaningful hope for its future. This is a community that believes through Jesus Christ all things are made possible. The Community of Transformation avoids the threat of sowing in sandy soil – blooming for only a short time with cheap grace and then fading away – and, by its orientation toward hope, also keeps itself from strangling on its own deep roots.

I believe that we at Good Shepherd have been and are an effective Community of Memory: we share in honorable worship, beautiful music, meaningful education, and all on a lovely campus. And that is good. Fidelity, however, requires more of us. Fidelity requires us to hold substantial hope for the good days that are ahead. Fidelity requires us to open wide our community to those who are new to this parish family, giving away our well-worn seat at the table, if need be, trusting in God's provision, rather than demanding what is first. Fundamentally, fidelity requires us to acknowledge our need for transformation: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit," we pray.

Do you store up treasures for yourselves, or are you rich toward God? Do you come to worship to be pleased or do you come to be inspired? Are you here to become a servant or to be served?

We are here to become the New Creation: to be transformed in the image of God and to share in the inauguration of God's reign. Friends, we are here to be changed, and we are here to change the world, nothing less. "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly...[those] were the ways [we] once followed, when [we] were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things...[see] that you have stripped the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised...slave and free; but Christ, [who] is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:8-11).