

Lex orandi, lex credendi: a three-week preaching series on worship and faith

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Rector, St. Francis Church

Part III – Sent (Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010)

Two weeks ago, I began a three-week preaching series on worship with the reminder that the Latin phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* provides a pretty good window into how Episcopalians do theology. Roughly translated, that phrase means that “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” To put it more simply: Episcopalians don’t tend to do theology by making dogmatic pronouncements or formulating new creedal statements. *We pray together*. Common prayer is about forming a listening community—a community that is listening to God and to each other. So when someone asks, “what do Episcopalians believe, anyway?” we try to step back and reflect on what it means for us to pray these words week after week, until by the grace of God we start to believe them, and then the words come are more than printed pages in a book, but taking hold in our lives as we begin to live them.

At the heart of our life together is the Eucharist: though we are many, we are one. So we have spent some time over these past couple of weeks reflecting on the shape of the Eucharistic liturgy, as we are gathered, fed, and sent. We began with the Collect for Purity, in which we pray that God’s Holy Spirit might inspire and cleanse our hearts so that our worship can be focused on the love of God made known in Jesus, and that we might in turn respond to that love as Mary did by worthily magnifying God’s holy Name. And then last weekend we focused on how we come with joy to meet our Lord—forgiven, loved, and free—discerning that the meal we share has a past, present, and future tense to it: *we remember Christ’s death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory*. As we proclaim this mystery of faith, we are mindful of Good Friday and Easter. We are also learning to entrust our future to God, in hope, confident with Julian of Norwich that “all will be well and all manner of things will be well.” *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*.

I wonder if the reading we heard today from the eighth chapter of Proverbs might provide us with a “hook” to this third and final meditation on worship, as we turn our attention to the post-Communion prayer to reflect on being a sent people?

*Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out...*

Where do we find God the Holy Trinity? Not just in Church, but in the streets. We are sent from here into the world because God isn’t confined to this building. We find God already present at the crossroads of the cities and towns we come from—at the mall and in our schools and on the soccer fields and dance studios and black box theaters and police stations.

It has become a familiar rallying call of preachers of all stripes to critique the dominant culture and I know I’m no exception to that rule. Liberals tend to be more comfortable critiquing corporate greed and the military-industrial complex while conservatives tend to be more comfortable critiquing Hollywood’s values and the erosion of the nuclear family. But in fact, the Church is *part* of that culture we critique and moreover, the culture is complex. Even when mainline Christians feel more and more like we are on the sidelines, we need to be careful about making blanket indictments. We are part of the culture. What we need, as Christians, is wisdom and *discernment* so

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that we can faithfully attend to the alternative narrative that this Eucharistic Prayer invites us to live—the narrative of being a gathered, fed, and sent people. We can't do that if we are trying to run away from the world! Our work, as the Church, is to *leaven* the culture, *illuminate* it, and make it a little bit *saltier*. Our work is to become a people who are sent into the world—*God's* world—with a mission and a purpose. We are sent from this place knowing in advance that God has already gone ahead of us. What we need are eyes to see and ears to hear.

There are two post-communion prayers we try to use more or less in balanced ways over the course of the year. While the words differ slightly in each of them, the themes are pretty much the same. Both prayers thank God for having gathered and fed us. And then both prayers remind us that the ball is in our court as we are sent into the world to do the work God has given us to do. *We have been graciously accepted as living members of Christ's Body; we are now sent into the world in peace.* We go, knowing full well that the world can be an unsteady and confusing place. That is why we ask God for strength and courage.

In Holy Baptism we promised “to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ”—a promise we regularly renew several times a year. That will take a different shape for each of us, but I think we can all agree that if we go into the world and are total chameleons that blend in so well with the world's values that one would be hard pressed to see how our faith has transformed our lives, then we probably have some work to do. We are meant to live our lives so that Christ's light shines through us.

We are sent out of this place to be salt, and light, and yeast. Each of those metaphors, by the way, reminds us that it doesn't take a lot. The late Krister Stendahl used to joke that Christians have sometimes acted like our commission is to make the whole world into a salt mine! But just a little bit of salt on our steak makes it taste even better. One small candle gives off enough light in a dark room for us to find our way. And it doesn't take very much yeast to make a bowl full of dough rise. I take each of these Biblical metaphors of what the Church is for, given to us by Jesus himself, as encouragement. It really doesn't take much, and we can very often do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. We just need to try.

I just finished reading Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* – after reading *Blink* earlier this spring. It's a good reminder about what a few committed people can do in the world and that's a good reminder of what we are sent into the world to be about as Christians. What are we sent to do? *To love and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart.* That's it: we are called to be faithful witnesses in the world. Since God is not locked in the Church, but can already be found at the crossroads and city gates and in the mall and on the baseball fields, our work is to look for God in the face of our neighbor. And we need to do our best to let our neighbor see the face of God in us.

I bet we can all agree that if we are out of control and yelling at our teenager, or yelling at our parent, or our boss, or our employee, or at Town Meeting, or at vestry—then we are probably not bearing witness, with courage, to the love of God in Christ. Less obvious are all of the passive-aggressive ways that can yield the same result of fanning the flames of anxiety and fear. But when we are doing those things, we can be pretty sure that we are not serving God with gladness and singleness of heart.

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Beyond those obvious ways, however, it is sometimes difficult to know when to speak and when to be still, when to embrace and when to refrain from embracing, when to protest and when to live to fight another day. We want to be instruments of peace but sometimes it's hard to know what is required. This, I think, is why we need one another; why we need community and prayer and friends in Christ. This is why we pray for strength and courage *before* we were sent out into the world to do the work God gives us to do. Because sometimes it's hard to know what the right thing is, even if we have the courage to do that thing.

The post-Communion prayer found on page 366 of the *Prayerbook* thanks God *for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of [Christ] and heirs of [God's] eternal kingdom*. That's a very powerful statement. Most of us carry around lots of messages, some healthy and some not so much, about who we are and about who we are supposed to be. Some of us may feel we are sent out in order to do it all—in order to save the world. But that job is taken. Our work is not to save the world, it's to live knowing the world is already saved. It's to participate now as heirs of that eternal kingdom. As we are sent, we are reminded that we live in Christ and therefore need to let our words and actions and gestures reflect that reality. To leave here and love and serve God, is to live in a way that points others to the One who is the source of that full and abundant life. It's too easy to fall into the trap of becoming the kind of person who says, "I wish I lived in a neighborhood where people behaved like neighbors." When we find the courage and strength to be better neighbors, it really does rub off. Not on everyone perhaps, but neighborliness is as contagious as anxiety is.

Last Sunday afternoon I was at the Big Y and there was this old guy who was two persons in front of me wearing a Veterans cap. He was in no rush. He made his purchases and the bill was \$3.09. He had three ones, and begin to hem and haw a bit. It became clear to me at least that he wasn't short of money; he just didn't want to break a twenty. The guy between us told him not to worry; that he would cover the dime. The guy in the cap was clearly grateful, handed over the three ones and started to leave. It turned out he "won" one of those silver coins they give out at Big Y, however. So he turns and hands it to the guy behind him! Now the guy in front of me has his order rung up and the kid is doing the checking (who hasn't really been paying very close attention to what is unfolding before his very eyes) asks the man if he has a silver coin. Which of course he now does. He and I both watched as \$3.10 came off of this second guy's order! (I have no idea what he had purchased in there that got his silver coin to take that much off but I swear I'm not making this up!) I watched it all with amazement, feeling like I was on holy ground. I'd like to say that if I'd been behind the guy who didn't want to break his twenty that I would have covered his dime. But I'm not sure that I would have: he seemed a bit like a grumpy old man and a part of me would have liked to have seen him dig deeper. And I have no idea if the guy in front of me was a confessing Christian or not. But you know what? I went through the rest of that day feeling a little bit more neighborly and generous. I watched a brother spare a dime, an act, which in this day and age really is not even remotely a big deal. Just a little light, a little yeast, a little sprinkle of salt. But it rippled down the line; magnified many times beyond its value, in the blink of an eye.

*Wisdom is calling...*and not just at the Big Y, either!