



Grace Church

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Rector

Place, Family, Field

Sermon for Pentecost 6, June 28, 2016

Readings: Proper 8, year C: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Sermon text: As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:55-62

I just finished reading *The Fractured Republic* by Yuval Levin, a political commentator. He makes the case that our republic has been fracturing—bifurcating really—into an overly centralized state and a diffuse multiplicity of individuals. There has been a weakening and fraying of the mediating institutions between the individual and the national state. These include churches, schools, local and state governments. He argues for a politics of subsidiarity¹ in which resources and decisions are moved into local communities and human-scale institutions that in turn rebuild the body politic or civil society in ways appropriate for a more pluralistic, diverse world than that of last century.

As I thought about his analysis, an image came to mind of a bicycle wheel: all the spokes lead directly from rim to center, from individual to central state. It works fine until some of the spokes come loose—then quickly the wheel deforms, wobbles and no longer works.

But if the mediating institutions are part of the picture, the image becomes more of a net or web. This is a more resilient model—though perhaps harder to connect.

¹ **Subsidiarity** is a principle of social organization that originated in the Roman Catholic Church. In its most basic formulation, it holds that social and political issues should be dealt with at the most immediate (or local) level that is consistent with their resolution. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subsidiarity>.

The local church can be one of the knots of the web, a local community transforming lives and working together to make a better world. This is our mission and I believe it is vital to the future of our world. And I note that this is a different image than that of the typical Protestant picture of an individual soul connecting directly to God through faith in Christ—rim to hub—with the church serving only as a place where the Word can be heard and conversion catalyzed. Nor is it a picture of the church as a sort of gateway community that all those who would be saved need to enter and pass through. In the web or network image, church is actually an important expression of the work of God, the body of Christ into which individuals are incorporated as members to then go into the world to serve God's mission. But it is not the only way God works in the world. Other communities and institutions are loci of mission as well, and the church is called to work together with all people of faith and good will to be the hands of God at work in the world.

I think the gospel reading this morning provides three more metaphors for the work of the church: A **place** (to lay your head), a **family** (of the living), a **field** (keep your hand on the plow and hold on). Let me explore these for a moment and then conclude by returning to the role of the church in society.

1. Church as a Welcoming Place

In the passage from Luke chapter 9, Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus has three very briefly sketched encounters with potential followers. In the first encounter, an unnamed person says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Jesus has left his Galilean homeland and is going to Jerusalem. He no longer speaks of going to the Temple as to his Father's house, as he did when he was twelve. Now it is a corrupt place and he will have to clean house in the face of intense opposition. He does not pretend to Herod's Palace or Pilate's Praetorium, seat of Roman power. Jerusalem is only the place where prophets go to speak their burning word and be stoned for it (Matthew 23:37). The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head—but his opponents will lay his body in the tomb there.

So perhaps that is what he is telling the would-be follower: if you follow me, be prepared; it will not be a bed of roses but a crown of thorns.

I would like to think that if Jesus were alive today he would find Grace Church welcoming, a good place to rest and lay his head. In the Rule of St Benedict, the wise abbot instructs his fellow monks to welcome the stranger as if welcoming Christ himself. I hope we follow that rule here.

Grace is a place of true welcome and genuine love, a place of prayer and holiness; the bricks and stones and stained glass seem to glow with the prayers and service of earlier generations.

We will celebrate 150 years of prayers and service beginning in September—150 years ago in September the cornerstone of the first Grace Church in Hart's Village was laid. We are part of the communion of saints in this place. Let us carry on and honor the tradition. But not only by standing by the big red door, service leaflet in hand, waiting for the newcomer to venture in. Let us go into the neighborhood, among our friends, acquaintances, and strangers, and invite them to our beautiful church. "Invite, welcome, connect" is

the three-verb name of a new program for church growth—the old word, hardly spoken among Episcopalians, is evangelism. Spreading the good news—in our own way; personally, thoughtfully. We can do this. We have to do this. The culture has changed; we must too.

2. Church as a Living Family

For a living and growing church is not a museum or, worse, a mausoleum. We do not worship a God of the dead, as Jesus noted, but of the living (Matthew 22:32). In his second encounter, a man told Jesus he would follow him—we aren't told whether Jesus asked him first or not. But then he said he had to bury his father first. A reasonable request. But Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Seems harsh. But the point I take is that those who follow Jesus are a new family, a new life. Jesus himself maintained contact with his family of birth—his mother was by his side in Jerusalem and his brother became a leader of the early church. But he would not let them pull him back into a safer life. It was first a question of finding and obeying the Father's will. Then a new family composed itself around that teaching and teacher.

The church is always tempted to stay in the past, to remember the glory days and stick to the old ways. It is human nature. But Jesus is calling us forward, to new ways, new life. Every generation has to answer the question anew: who do you say that I am? Each generation has to make its own worship and discipleship meaningful and beautiful and powerful. New wine in new wineskins—though it is still the wine of Christ.

In the spring of 2017 we will undertake a spiritual vitality program called RenewalWorks. The program uses a survey to assess our spiritual practices and a parish working group will make recommendations to enhance our practices of prayer and scripture reading, of community-building and community service and leadership. Consider the practice of reading scripture (*lectio divina*, Bible study). Read as text with fixed meaning, whether as literary canon or literal truth, the Bible misleads, or gives only in part. As St Paul wrote, "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Indeed, the Bible has an amazing Holy Spirit infusing its letters; there is always some fresh understanding waiting to emerge from the old stories. The Holy Spirit reminds us of what Jesus taught (John 14:26) but also leads the church into new truths we could not bear or understand earlier (John 16:12-13): the evil of slavery, the equality of women, the possibility of faithful and mutual same sex love. There is a big Episcopalian float in the gay pride march this afternoon in NYC; I was glad to be able to give a donation toward it. Orlando reminds us of the work we need to do to overcome evil and hatred in this world. Let us include all people into the living family of a church that is democratic, diverse, and non-exclusionary, which yet holds on to the the gospel proclamation, creedal affirmations, the holy sacraments and the great tradition.

3. Church as Workers in the Mission Field

"Keep your hand on the gospel plow and hold on"—so goes an old spiritual that Michael Curry our presiding Bishop likes to quote. It is part of his repeated message Jesus started a movement not a religion. We are on the move—out into the mission field. Put your hand on the gospel plow and hold on.

The Greek word for church—*ecclesia*—means those called out. The church is not a gathering only, a congregation or synagogue (gathering), but those who are *called* and *gathered* in order to be *sent* (Karl Barth). Each of us into our own field: to plow, sow, water and then—as Jesus said—harvest, for the fields are ready but the laborers are few (Luke 10:2).

Go on then—you are the salt of the world—but what use is salt that stays in the cupboard. You are the light of the world—don't hide your lamp under a basket. Christians are only a part of the people of earth, a significant fraction but still and probably always only a faction, one part or party among many. But part is to be the leaven that lifts the whole loaf. These are the homely metaphors that Jesus used to describe the work of the church.

Note that all of them share this common element: the work of the church is not for its own benefit but for that of the world: to flavor and preserve that which is good, to light and lead the way, to lift and feed the multitudes. We are not ourselves, as Christians, the harvest, the fruit to be gathered into the storehouse of God (heaven); we are the workers sent out to help harvest God's wide field.

This is why Jesus told the third person he encountered that if he wants to follow to be a disciple, he must linger with his family; if you have started plowing, you must finish the work. Then the worker goes home to the family; then the meal around the table and the laughter after a hard day's work.

The temptation is to make the church a second home, a place to reconnect with friends, to be fed spiritually (and often enough actually). But the church is a place to learn what it means to be a disciple and to recharge on the sabbath; it is a living family we love and care for, but with whom we are called to serve those outside, the stranger, the poor, the lonely, the prisoner, the child, the dying, and those yet to be born. We each have our mission field.

Grace Church as a collective body also has a mission field: NE Dutchess County. The third goal of the Grace strategic plan (Grace Vision 2020) is to grow in regional impact. We are already making a regional impact with Grace Latino Outreach, EPIC, our regional youth leadership development program, Church Alliance senior housing, and our several food programs. We have more in the works—with your support.

In his farewell speech, as recorded in John, Jesus said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants but friends" (John 15:15). As followers of Jesus, we have the privilege and honor to be included in God's mission of restoration, reconciliation and new creation. We are fellow-workers in God's vineyard. We are part of the family of Christ. We let us strive to be a place where the Son of Man can lay his head: our hearts, our hands, our fellowship of love, this place of Grace. Amen.

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