



race Church

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ANNUAL ADDRESS

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 25, 2015

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Sermon texts: The present form of this world is passing away. 1 Corinthians 7:31

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Mark 1:15

We know at least two things, as I read the biblical texts assigned for this third Sunday after the Epiphany. One, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "The present form of this world is passing away." And the second from the Gospel according to Mark: Jesus recruited Simon Peter and Andrew his brother by saying to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

We are called to recognize what Jesus calls elsewhere the signs of the times, to see that the times are always a'changin', nowadays more rapidly than ever before, and that the thing to do in response, the first and last thing, the alpha and omega, is to *follow Jesus*.

And he will make of us fishers of people. That is, Jesus calls us to be disciples. We need to be taught the good news of the kingdom of God—that God is always near, indeed within as well as the very ground of being—and gathered into a new community governed by the rule of love and forgiveness. From this base community and training in discipleship we are sent into the world to sow the seeds of righteousness and mercy, spread light and joy, and strive for justice and truth. That's the gospel news.

So much we know. But how do we put it into practice? How do we follow Jesus in this time of change and necessary adaptation?

Well, one way not to do it is to follow anyone other than Jesus as sole leader. No matter how gifted, charismatic and compelling, one person in sole authority, the image of the heroic leader, will not succeed as well as the group working as a team. It's a proven fact, teams that work well create more and better ideas, generate more energy and commitment, and do better in the end than individuals or teams dominated by one or two individuals. The highest performing teams have input from all members, diversity in gender and other variables and a high degree of "emotional intelligence," the ability to read and respond sensitively to the mental states of others (women do especially well in this kind of "mindreading").¹

None of this comes as a surprise to the people here. Grace has a history and current abundance of gifted lay and clergy leaders of both genders and a variety of backgrounds and orientations. And I pledge to work within a team model, despite my natural tendency to believe that my way and my ideas are always best, and why can't everyone just see that. But, though I still can't read minds (probably saving me a lot of embarrassment), I have heard the good word and repented; let's work together and create a vital and growing church. Still, the pastor does have the responsibility to guide and protect the flock; to see what lies ahead and learn from other leaders what challenges and opportunities are around; to help get the team together and set a direction and plan to get there.

With this understanding of the role of leadership, let me set out my "five ship" model of church and to put a few markers out for the year ahead. I encourage everyone to respond and participate in the weeks and months ahead as we fill out the picture and make history from what is now only a hope.

First, the five ships of church: worship, discipleship, fellowship, partnership and stewardship. The first four are vehicles or ways that we carry out the mission of God given to us through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The fifth ship, stewardship, is like the tanker ship that refuels, resources and cares for the well-being of the whole.

Let's touch on each ship in turn. First, and the primary orientation of the church, is **worship**. Nothing else matters and no plan will work if we are not in harmony with the heart and will of God. God's dream for humanity and all creation has been revealed through scripture, nature, what is true and good and beautiful, and most explicitly in Jesus Christ. When we practice daily prayer, mindfulness, compassion and gratitude we enhance our sense and understanding of God's heart. When we come together to worship on Sunday or at other times, we are strengthened, fed and challenged, inspired and taught. We

¹See "Why Some Teams Are Smarter Than Others" (NYT Jan 16, 2015)

become a blessed people, and that means we are changed from the inside, healed and renewed, for the mission of God, to be a blessing to the world.

Our worship services should aspire to be inspiring, using aesthetically beautiful spaces, music and prayers to lift our eyes to heaven. Our worship should also challenge us to look inside, to confess our own sinfulness—that which draws us from the love of God and each other—and to vow to fulfill our baptismal covenant as followers of the Way. Our worship services should appeal and connect in different ways to the variety of people gathered each Sunday or other occasion. Some will be old, some young, some new to church, many quite familiar with the Prayer Book and the Hymnal. We should strive to reflect the diversity of the wider community, in age, ethnicity, orientation. To this end, our worship team will plan our Sabbath and occasional services. Every Sunday will not be the same. We will delight in the changing church seasons and explore the richness of the Prayer Book, alternative liturgies and the worldwide treasury of Christian music. We will do this not only as stand alone congregation, but in cooperation with other churches and through interfaith and civic services.

I will touch more on ecumenism and interfaith work in the partnership section, but let me just note a couple of examples of what I have in mind. One example is what has already been done to enhance this worship space: the last row of pews has been removed, creating a more generous and welcoming entrance and directing the eye to the font and rose window in the baptistry niche. An icon has replaced the fabric hanging behind the side altar. Both of these moves were my idea but proceeded in consultation with the healing prayer service congregation, serving as a sort of ad hoc worship space team, and the Vestry. Another example takes us out of doors. There is an old tradition in the church of observing “rogation days” in spring. In England, this meant taking the congregation on a procession around the parish—effectively the village—having the children “beat the bounds” with sticks, learning the boundaries, and blessing the fields. I will work with Fr Ogle at St Peter’s to adapt this tradition to our area and have a “blessing of the fields” on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon in May (as yet to be determined). We will go to a number of local farms and meet the people, bless their fields, pray for seasonal weather and praise God for the beauty of creation. Sounds like fun—and it will expand our sense of liturgy and worship.

Discipleship is role of the church as “a school of learning for the Lord’s service,” as St Benedict once described it. We vow in baptism to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and make various promises as to how to go about that. Confirmation, reception and renewal of vows are other times we declare our intention to follow Jesus. But what does that mean in practice? We have to try out in our own lives the lessons Jesus taught the first disciples, the apostles, and those in every generation since (for instance, the power of non-violent resistance). We have a rich storehouse of stories and wisdom, history, vision, poetry and proverbs in the Bible. The lives of the saints and the teaching of the church build on the biblical foundation. We examine and share our experience of God in our lives through small groups and spiritual formation opportunities such as retreats and spiritual direction. We reflect and reason together about the doctrines of faith,

developing new understandings of ancient wisdom. We teach children, youth and adults, for we should strive to a learning community for all ages. The key point is to remember that we are first and foremost *disciples* of Christ, only secondarily *members* of church. This principle should guide all our teaching efforts.

I think we have a strong foundation in discipleship here at Grace. We have an active Sunday School, Youth Group and various small groups. We have started a Bible study group that meets on Wednesdays after the healing prayer service. Before that service, I lead a short children's chapel for the preschool children—what a joy. They taught me the grace they use: “Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the birds that sing, thank you God for everything.” And so I am a learner at their feet as well as their teacher, teaching them stories from the Bible, songs and the Lord's Prayer. On Sunday morning between services, a small group is two weeks into a five week self-guided retreat using the First Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola. This is a deep way to explore our own memories and imagination and feelings as we see “Inner Peace Through Divine Love.” Future spiritual formation opportunities include a Lenten retreat lead by Fr Masud, and a speaker series being planned for late April and May on “ending well”: the practical and spiritual aspects of aging.

Fellowship is a word you hear in church circles meaning friendship and community building. One way to describe our church is “A community of friends who follow the Way of Jesus.” The task of fellowship is not only to create working groups and effective ministry teams, but to build true friendships and enduring relationships. Grace is good at this. I will try not to mess up a good thing with over-meddling. We have good coffee hour hospitality, self-guided men's and women's groups, well attended social occasions (yum), and strong fund raising events. Of course, we can always do better—the main thing being to involve more people and share leadership responsibilities. The 80-20 rule is pretty hard to break, but it shouldn't mean that it is always the same 20 percent who do 80 percent of the work on a given occasion. Sign up for something, without being badgered, and learn to say no without guilt if you can't do it with joy.

Partnership is a way of getting at our work as a church outside our walls and in cooperation with other churches and institutions. Here at Grace we are big on partnership. Look at Grace Latino Outreach, the Mid-Hudson Youth Group, regional food programs, and our participation in a variety of civic events, most recently the Christmas Parade of Lights. In a couple of weeks, on February 8, we will host an Epiphany Evensong, with Taize music led by Fr Masud, and liturgical participation by clergy from St Joseph's, St Peter's and of course Grace. Then, in Lent, we will renew the tradition of an ecumenical Lenten Sunday evening prayer service rotating among the various churches of Millbrook and outskirts. Even more exciting, we are exploring ways to be the host of a new regional youth leadership development program, on the model of one that Rural and Migrant Ministry has done on the other side of the river for twenty years. Stay tuned. We will also be serving as a regional leader for a diocesan pilgrimage planned for August to go to Atlanta, Selma, Montgomery and the small town in Alabama where Jonathan Daniels was murdered fifty years ago this August 15. It is primarily a

youth oriented trip but all are welcome.

Finally, **stewardship**. Effective ministry needs financial support. That is certainly true, and a major task of our stewardship team is to plan and execute our annual pledge campaign. They did a good job, but these are challenging times for churches—we need everyone on board, no matter their level of giving. Each of us should also strive to be proportional givers, trying to move each year closer to the standard of the tithe (10% of income to church and charity). The stewardship committee also worked last year on promoting a ministry fair in Pentecost. This year, we will be sponsoring a speaker series, as I mentioned, on ending well. One of the goals is to create a planned giving campaign and increase our endowment for the support of our buildings and grounds, help with operating costs and, even more critically, support new efforts in mission and ministry aimed at a new generation, at people who aren't coming to traditional Sunday morning worship services. Remember, Jesus called us to be fishers for people. Let's get better at doing it in this changing time.

Stewardship also includes the job we as humanity were given right at the beginning, to tend the Garden, to care for creation. This is becoming an ever more pressing call. How should we respond as a church and as individuals? How we can help convene and catalyze people and resources to improve our environment, teach our children, leave a thriving and resilient community of all God's creatures. Big questions, big challenges. But great opportunities as well. Over this next year, I encourage you to join me in discerning our gifts and strengths and challenges as a church, assessing the resources and needs of the wider community, brainstorming and honing in on strategies to put the gifts, resources and needs together in mission, so that we can present to the congregation a new vision and strategic plan at the Annual Meeting next year. The first step will be a mutual ministry review on March 21 led by Fr Masud, together with the retreat that afternoon to discern our gifts as a church. In June, I hope to convene a team to work on mapping the assets of our area. In September, we will begin the visioning and planning work. If you are interested in participating please let me and the wardens know. This is a team effort. And you are a great team. I am proud, honored and blessed to be part of Grace Church in this year of our Lord 2015.

In Christ's name. Amen.

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