

Sermon, November 12, 2011

Rev Deacon Ricky Brightman

This is the time of the annual Diocesan Convention when representatives of all Episcopal Churches in Rhode Island gather together for worship, refreshment, renewal, and re-commitment. We do business relating to diocesan money – spent, received, and needed - and hear reports about the condition of churches in our diocese and their needs. We also listen to reports about current and planned Diocesan Programs – Congregational Development; the Episcopal Conference Center; the proposed Jonathan Daniels House and Episcopal Service Corps Community to be established in South Providence in 2013; and the continuing work done by the Mission Task Force as they explore the new Diocesan Mission Focus on “Feeding the Hungry” and make plans for Convocation in March 2012, part of which will be held here at St Luke’s. The 2115 Strategic Planning Task Force continues their work of reviewing existing resources, missions, and structures to order to make recommendations that will address future mission and ministry of the Diocese.

As a healthy, growing, program-oriented parish with good facilities and many parishioners already involved in Diocesan activities – we are finding that St Luke’s is being asked more and more to host and become involved in Diocesan programs. It’s not

just “us” any more. Even within the local community we are looked upon to play a leadership role. Both situations are important to take into account with our rector search.

The first sermon I preached here at St Luke’s was right after another Convention. The theme then centered on the Millennium Development Goals. Remember? We had MDG piggy coin banks and a U-2 concert that winter to raise money for that program.

In 2000, world leaders created the Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight quantifiable targets designed to cut poverty in half by the year 2115. The MGD’s envisioned rich and poor nations working together in partnership to combat poverty. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted the MDG’s as a mission priority and set aside a line item in the budget for MDG related programs. Some of the money we send to our Diocese as apportionment, still goes to support the MDG’s

While we still support these goals, more recently a variety of global environmental disasters have combined with national concerns about employment, housing, hunger, and medical care and have pushed individual and local budgets to a straining point. This has also affected many churches where giving is reduced, investment income has had a lower yield, and church property itself has often suffered from a lack of attention to adequate maintenance.

Despite Friday night's spectacular worship here at St. Luke's, with a musical offering by a combined children's choir of 52 voices, and a filling fellowship hour that followed - in the light of a clear cold Saturday morning we heard more about merged and closing churches, cuts in diocesan staffing, low stewardship in individual churches and for Episcopal Charities (only 60% of their goal). Like St Luke's, the Diocese is also in an uncertain place of changing leadership.

Perhaps, we should ride out the storm – wait for new leaders to tell us what to do and guide us through these uncertain times – hide our talents (money) in the ground until the 'boss' returns. However, as we heard in today's gospel reading that doesn't work in a world where conditions are ever changing – both for the good and the bad. If we wait to really master the computer, or the smart phone, or any other new technology, it may be too late to catch up. This pertains to people as well as the church.

There can be several interpretations of today's gospel reading although it seems simple enough. "The boss" gives three servants various amounts of money (talents) before he goes away. "What to do"? Two of the servants traded and invested and increased what they had been given. The third, perhaps out of fear of the master or uncertainly of self-worth, dug a hole and hid what had been given him, only to be berated on the boss's return.

Nothing had been done with the money, time and the individual had stood still!

This parable comes at the end of the Gospel of Matthew and at the end of Jesus' teaching ministry as he moves toward Jerusalem and a final confrontation between God's kingdom and the system that has opposed and resisted it. Jesus has said - listen, don't hide your talents under a basket, let your light shine, have faith like a tiny mustard seed that will grow into a mighty plant, don't bury your money and stand still and frozen. Remember what I have said and taught you - even if I am not here!

There was much energy at Convention 2011 with talk of a new mission focus on "Episcopalians Feeding the Hungry" – and not just physical food but companionship, shared work and accomplishment, stimulating worship, community, beauty, justice – and not just on Sundays and in a “church”: setting. This will be the keynote of Convocation in March 2012, partially hosted at St Luke's. There was news of a new Episcopal Service Corps Program that would gather interns to work at a variety of sites in the South Providence area and maintain an Episcopal presence there. The ECC Board is exploring creative ways to make the camping experience more accessible to more children. Search and Transition Committees are working hard at the Search Process for a new Bishop to be elected in June 2012. And a five

year Strategic Planning Committee is hard at work evaluating present programs and resources that will help in planning for our future together.

MISSION is a key word - with the reference to what the church does, not just what or where the church is. Raising money to dig a deep water well for a small community in Ethiopia or to support a goat farm in the Sudan – building a community garden and sharing the crop with two neighboring food pantries – preparing a weekend shared breakfast or dinner for folks in the community for whom money is tight. Flinging the doors open and bringing the church into the world.

For a few Sundays I have gone to “The Church at Occupy Providence” to worship together with a varied group of people who are peacefully protesting the economic situation that the state and country is in, discern ways they can work together to be of help, and to create a supportive community. All are welcome.

Busses circle the park and plaza, business people go about their work, students pass by on their way to RISD or Johnson and Wales. A wide variety of small tents cover the park, with larger tents and structures placed strategically for information, first aid, and food. Nearby is the Federal Building where, many years ago, another group gathered every Friday afternoon to protest the Vietnam War.

There are no leaders but the Statue of General Burnside seems to be a gathering place and where you will find identifiable clergy and lay people ready to provide a worship experience to all who wish to gather around a small table set with a cloth, chalices, pitchers, plates. Members of this temporary community join in along with one time visitors and passers-by, church people from other denominations. We gather to pray the Gospel, sing, share in Christ's body and blood, and experience Christ's presence in one another.

Simply the sight of identifiable clergy, gathering to offer a service, and encouraging participation through music and voice has been welcomed and elicited different reactions. Some people have been surprised, many express gratitude we are there. One asked "where have you been". Another organizer commented "you're the first group of Christians to set foot in this place. Meanwhile, we've been feeding hungry people and demanding justice for everyone. Aren't these the things churches are supposed to care about?"

We could argue about the place of the Church in the streets and public park. We could debate the place of the church in the political arena. We could leave this encounter to those who have a specific beef or agenda. We could relegate this to a city or specific neighborhood issue, not my church or town or problem. That is not to talk about right now.

What I do want to share is that Jesus spoke of the commandments to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves – in fact the Gospel reading on the first day of worship came from the Beatitudes. Jesus, especially calls us to love our most vulnerable neighbors, the ones those of us with privilege usually overlook, those who suffer at the hands of the powerful, our sisters and brothers who have lost their homes to foreclosure, those who live and die without access to adequate health care, those who are “undocumented”.

I have been reminded that what people really need and hunger for is someone to be with them, listen to them, pray with them. Comfort came from the presence of people who care enough to leave their own comfortable places of worship to be with friends and neighbors who are hurting and offer them a place to worship on their own turf.

When we get out of our own personal and church space surprising things happen and the mission of the church becomes real as reflected in the faces of our neighbors. Perhaps this ministry will continue in some way throughout the winter. Perhaps people will find other ways to bring “church” outside to their neighbors. Hopefully programs described at Diocesan Convention will inspire us all to expand and extend our vision of church as the living body of Christ and not only a “building with pews”.

Be present. Step out of your own comfort zone. Sit with your neighbors and listen to their stories. Show up. Worship in a way that feeds you. Find and feed others. Do not bury your talents in the ground and wait.