

A POWER WORKING IN US TO DO MORE THAN WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE

A sermon by the Rev'd David J. Anderson, the Day of Pentecost, 2009. Church of St John the Evangelist.

WHAT WE CAN'T DO ON OUR OWN

I've never been what people call "handy". You will understand, then, the concern of those who know me best when it was decided that we would be installing a washing machine on our main floor and I announced that I would be doing the plumbing myself.

My home project began as it should, where it should, at the hardware store, where I received the friendly advice that I needed to choose the right sort of taps and all of the other plumbing supplies that would be needed. "Just solder your copper right into here," said the salesman. Then he looked at me over his glasses, "You do know how to solder, don't you?"

"Oh, me? Of course." Well, that was not exactly true. But my nephew had kindly agreed to assist me and he had a little experience with a few plumbing repairs and we reasoned that together we could take on my little job.

So one night Colin and I worked together, and while we did make a few mistakes and the job is not exactly pretty, it is done and it is water tight. The washing machine is installed.

I could not have done that job on my own, without the help of my nephew. I needed a torch, the proper solder, flux and the necessary knowledge of what needed to be done. My nephew had all these things, and in bringing them to me he made it possible for me to do something I could not do on my own.

In each of this Sunday's lectionary readings, I am struck by how the Holy Spirit makes it possible for people to do things they could not do on their own.

In Acts, the Spirit empowers the disciples to speak in languages they had never learned and gives them a boldness to do so publicly—a boldness that up to this point they had not had. In Romans, the Spirit helps believers pray in ways that they could not pray on their own. And in John, Jesus says the Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth—truth that they "could not bear" without the Spirit's help. The Holy Spirit will reveal things to the disciples they could not discern on their own, and then give them the strength to live that truth accordingly.

THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE, HERE AND NOW

Last Sunday we finished up our preaching series where we were working our way through the First Letter of John. As our Easter season series, we listened as John taught us what life in the light of the resurrection is all about. We finished up with John speaking to us about the gift of eternal life.

What we said last week, in light of the recent things that we have been learning, is that eternal life is not just about—or even primarily about—life in the future. We recognised that eternal life, life in light of the resurrection of Christ, the abundant life Jesus came to bring us, is a quality of life in the present. And what we said about this life is that we should live the life.

Now there is a part of living the life that is up to us. Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed and after having served his disciples by washing their feet, giving them an example of the way that they should love one another, said, “Now that you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” There are things for us to do. Living the life means that we will live a certain way and that we will do certain things. Loving one another as Christ has loved us.

But there is another sense in which the life is a gift. There is a sense in which we are unable to live the life on our own and in our own power and we are utterly dependent upon God’s good grace to live the life. Eternal life is the gift of God. In other words, God has both knowledge and resources that we don't have. And in sharing these things freely with us, God makes it possible for us to do what we cannot do alone. This sounds simple, but it raises the question: What are we doing in our lives and in our church that takes us beyond what we could do in our own natural capacities? Asked another way, where in our lives and our church is the power of God unmistakably evident?

WHERE IS THE LIFE?

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP: BISHOP MICHAEL

As you may know, our new bishop has only recently completed his first year as our diocesan bishop. Bishop Michael has been working very hard to articulate, share and engage our diocesan family in a vision for ministry for both the diocese and each parish. Back in the fall, Bishop Michael asked me to join the visioning team that has been giving shape to the process as well helping to flesh out the vision. It has been an exciting and engaging process.

My only reservation with the early part of the process was that everything seemed to be done in a great hurry. We had consultants who were working with us and the process just seemed entirely too driven. Then something quite remarkable happened.

Just days before our last session of Synod, where there was to be a major discussion and some decisions regarding this emerging vision, there was discernment that we were

moving too fast and needed to slow the process down. The agenda for the Synod meeting was radically changed just two days before the meeting took place.

At that meeting the Bishop had to answer criticism. Someone had said what many were thinking. The Bishop answered that criticism head on. He said, "To those of you who have said that these last minute changes make it look like we don't know what we are doing, I would like to tell you, very clearly, that we do not know what we are doing. Some people may be suspicious of this sort of talk, but it is my conviction that God is leading us in the process and so we have to be open to surprises." The Bishop called us to prayer and to dream. It was one of the best things that I have ever heard a bishop say.

DRAMATIC EVENTS AT ST JOHN'S: A TURNING POINT REACHED

God has been at work in our own parish in surprising ways recently. Just a year ago we were gathering together for a Special Vestry Meeting to hear bad news that our parish finances were in much worse shape than we had expected. And to say that they were worse than expected is to say something, because we had already planned for a substantial deficit. As 2008 dragged on there were serious questions about our ability to carry on with many of our core ministries; it looked we might need to downsize to such a degree that we might not have recognised ourselves anymore. My own future in the parish was very much in question as the only way to balance the budget seemed to be a significant reduction in personnel costs.

But something dramatic happened. We turned a corner. It began with the passionate stewardship talks given by a number of you last fall at all of our services where you said that the ministry of this place is too important to be compromised and you set an example in your own personal stewardship.

In many ways I feel that I can fix our Annual Vestry meeting as a significant turning point, where we passed a balanced budget for 2009. Instead of focusing so much of our time and attention wringing our hands about money, Parish Council and other leadership groups have been able to focus on important ministry matters. In just three and a half months since our Annual Meeting there is a new sense of momentum, a growing conviction that God is at work among us.

MIGHTY RUSHING WIND, OR PASSING GAS?

I realize that not everyone is convinced. We are not yet seeing dramatic change in many aspects of ministry. People are saying that they have heard all of this talk of excitement before.

But I have to share with you my conviction that God has preserved this parish for a time such as this. When neighbourhood churches have closed all over this city so that people can move out to the suburbs and the big-box churches, here we are. We are still here at a time when our neighbourhood is seeing renewal and when people are again hungry

for the kind of experience of community that is available in neighbourhood like this and in a church like ours. I was talking to a young family that recently made St John's their church home. They drive across half the city. They don't live in this neighbourhood, but they hope to move here. They used to attend a big-box church, but they have made St John's their church home because they want to be part of a community. We are blessed to have them.

Before long we are going to have a new sign on Locke Street. We are going to start letting people know we are here, because right now, we are the best kept secret in the neighbourhood. We are going to grow in our ability to welcome people, not only at the door of the church, but to welcome them into the centre of our life together. We are going to grow in our ability to do ministry beyond our doors, engaging people in our neighbourhood and living the gospel in our city. These things are coming together.

Pentecost seems far removed from the sober realities of church life most days. We can become almost jaded about Pentecost: here we go again with the mighty rushing wind, with people speaking in tongues, with everybody understanding everybody else. It's nice for them, but we haven't seen anything like that around here for a long time, and besides, if we did, we might discourage it. The story of the Holy Spirit arriving and birthing a church so alive that others think its drunk can seem pretty removed from the sober reality of church life.

In the past we may have searched in vain for a church so on fire that it looks drunk. We have found way too much sobriety in church. But something has happened to me this year when it comes to this story: I am high on it.

GLORY TO GOD, WHOSE POWER WORKING IN US ...

I'm celebrating this story because it reminds me that Pentecost comes at a time when we need it. The Holy Spirit makes it possible to do things that we could not have possibly done on our own. When we have hunkered down and become fearful of the future; when we are divided by different experiences, languages or even liturgies; when we are at the end of our resources and no longer even know how to pray: God pours out the Spirit. Something greater than our divisions, something more powerful than our discouragements is at work. When the Spirit moves we begin to hear the voices, the dream and visions of those whom we have previously shut out of the conversation. Old men and young women dream dreams. The power of love is at work among us. The Holy Spirit is at work to help us to dream dreams, see visions, to articulate and hear those dreams and visions and to live the life we have been called to live. There is a power at work in us to do more than we can even ask or imagine. That is what we are celebrating this day.

Thanks be to God!