

Sermon for St. Paul Episcopal Church, Kansas City, Missouri
June 25, 2006
Rev. Dr. Susan M. Smith

Proper 7, Year B

Job 38:1-11, 16-18 Psalm 107:1-32 (or 107:1-3, 23-32)
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
Mark 4:35-41; (5:1-20)

Collect: O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for ever and ever. Amen.

I. TEXT

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

II Cor 5:14-21

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I. *Margaret's Story*: My friend Margaret, in Alaska, had come from Michigan where all her family still was. And when her aunt lay dying, her cousins called and begged her to hurry home. She caught the first plane—but from Anchorage, it was a couple days before she could get there. She went straight from the airport to the nursing home, and arrived to discover her cousins and siblings gathered around her aunt whose breathing was shallow.

"Thank God you're here!" said her cousin. "Mom wants to pray."

So Margaret took her aunt's hand, and asked her what she'd like to pray for. "I just want to thank Jesus for all the blessings he's given me in this life," she replied. So Margaret gave thanks for her aunt, and all their family, and thanked Jesus for all the wonderful blessings of this life. Her aunt's breathing calmed. She died in peace.

But when Margaret arrived back home in Anchorage, she wondered to some of us how it was that this whole family of church-going people somehow didn't feel able to pray at their mother's bedside—the simplest prayer. "Why did they need me to come all the way from Alaska to pray with their mother?!" she asked.

II. *Jesus and the storm*: I imagine Jesus felt the same way in our Gospel story. There were fishermen, very knowledgeable about the sea, committed, faithful Jews, who have been with him for months—yet somehow, when the storm came up, an immediate need that they understand, *they didn't pray*. They were fearful and helpless, and finally, so grateful when *he* prayed! Why in the world is that??

III. *Why don't we pray?*

I imagine that the reason the disciples didn't pray was that *prayer is daunting*. The same things that intimidated the disciples also stopped Margaret's cousins, and also may stop us from turning to prayer. It seems to me that there are at least two things that may keep people from praying.

1. First, some situations are themselves so intimidating that we are immobilized. Like the deer in the headlights, we're stopped cold. It can be something specific, like the terrifying waves that made the disciples fear for their lives; or it can be something general, like the general dis-ease so many of us feel in the world today. We just feel fear—and we don't think to turn to prayer.
2. A second reason that prayer may daunt us is that we may lack the confidence that God will answer our prayers. Or maybe we don't feel confident that we know what to pray for, and we're afraid God may *answer* our prayers, only to realize we've prayed for the wrong thing, or too shallowly or unwisely.

And it's true that we are *called to pray for what God wants*—not just what we want. **We are called to align our prayers with God's will**—which requires a kind of pre-prayer prayer. It's like those old polarized lenses you could hold up to your eyes—and when the lines of the two lenses were perpendicular to each other, all you could see is black. But when you rotated one of the lenses 90 degrees so that the lines were parallel, you could see through the lenses clearly. When we align our prayers with God's will, the Holy Spirit can sail through to effect the changes we pray for.

Fear of the circumstances needing prayer, and *lack of confidence* in the effectiveness of our prayers or of our ability to align ourselves with God, may be why we're too intimidated to pray. Besides, do our prayers really matter? Does God even hear them?

Fearlessness and faith: two common themes in the Bible. It seems every other page of the Bible has the words, "Do not be afraid." "Fear not, for I have redeemed you" (Is 43). "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2). "Do not be afraid, little flock—it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Matthew).

And Paul and Jesus are always talking about faith. "If you have faith but the size of a mustardseed"... Apparently, the prophets and Jesus himself knew that fear and faithlessness are very present parts of the human condition—but ones which we are admonished and urgently invited to

overcome.

3. But I think there is a third reason why the disciples then, and us, now, are daunted by the thought of praying: and that is an (unconscious) anxiety that God *may in fact answer our prayers*. And when God answers prayer, *a new thing occurs*.

There is no way we can predict God's answer to prayer!!

Look at the story today of the Gerasene demoniac. This guy was possessed by that spirit for decades. Here comes Jesus and heals him—and when the people came by and saw the crazed guy they've been used to day after day—There he was in his right mind!! It is so... unexpected! It's odd, and different, and unfamiliar—They *can't stand it*. And they ask Jesus to leave town.

Or the passage from Job. Job cries out to God—and God answers him, with a direct answer—in the whirlwind. It's terrifying!! And the answer God gives is not necessarily the answer to the question Job thought he was asking. God's answer is *God's Presence*. God comes in person to Job—an awesome, terrible presence—in which God reminded Job—and us—of the relationship we small, finite, limited, mortal, vulnerable *creatures* have to the immortal invisible omniscient *Creator*.

IV. *Good News when God answers: relationship, and a new thing.*

On the other hand, the fact that God came to Job with an answer of any kind indicates God wants a relationship with Job, albeit a right one. God spoke directly to Job. Barbara Brown Taylor has a wonderful book called *When God is Silent* in which she points out that as people listened less and less to God, God seemed to stop speaking directly to people. Two weeks ago on Trinity Sunday, we read of God coming to speak to Moses in the fire of the burning bush. This week, God comes to speak to Job in the whirlwind. But by the time of Ezekiel, God was no longer in the earthquake, or the wind, or the fire. God came ... in the *silence*, in the “still, small voice”. Job was blessed to have God's word, a direct, comprehensible word—however unexpected an answer it was—a new creation, a new, unpredictable answer.

V. *Example: the new presiding bishop*

Another example of odd, unexpected answer to prayer happened at just this time last week, when the House of Bishops met in Columbus, Ohio, to elect the new presiding bishop. They prayed, and they voted. And the result was the first woman primate of the United States Province of the Anglican Communion. Katharine Jefferts Schori was elected presiding bishop on the fifth ballot, and confirmed by the House of Deputies. She will take office on All Saints Day, and will be installed at the Washington National Cathedral on November 4.

Some will be *angry* at this election. “What were those bishops *thinking?*” they will ask, “electing a *woman* to this job!?!”

Some will be *worried*. They will be worried for Katharine, and for good reason—some of the angry people may find ways to threaten or subvert her or her staff. We must pray for her every day. And these people may also be worried for our Church. How will all of our people accept a woman presiding bishop? Haven't we already had enough difference with Bp. Gene Robinson? Will this move break us apart? Unity is so terribly important, especially to us Episcopalians who didn't even split over slavery in the 19th century as so many of our sister denominations did. Some of us are worried.

A third group are *fearful* for what will happen in the Anglican Communion. “Whatever will the African bishops say, or do, now that they will have to deal with a *female primate?!?*” they rightfully ask. Our place in the Communion is already questioned by some. Will this exacerbate our sister provinces’ concern for us as church? Some of us are fearful for the Anglican Communion.

And a fourth group are *rejoicing* at this new thing the Lord has done, convinced that the prayer of the Church has been aligned with God’s will, and that the Holy Spirit has worked in this action. I confess to be part of this fourth group.

I knew Katharine in seminary, when she was the sacristan at CDSP, and I was in graduate school. She is grounded, and centered. She has a low voice and a calm demeanor. She listens deeply and has a certain wisdom about her. I have seen an Episcopal charism in her even from seminary days. I asked her then if she thought about the possibility of her becoming a bishop some day. “We’ll see,” she answered simply. Later, when she was ordained and working in Oregon as assistant in one parish and part-time priest-in-charge of an Hispanic parish (she’s fluent in Spanish), we met again at a conference on rural church ministry (“Living the Covenant,” Northfield, MN). For some reason, I asked her again whether it was time for her to become a bishop. “I still have a few things to learn,” she replied evenly: not denying the possibility of episcopal gifts, nor desiring such a thing. She had no ego about it—but the humility of self-knowledge and a willingness to serve where she is called.

Soon after that, she was indeed called to be bishop of Nevada. She had never been the rector of a parish.

Some people question this. It is indeed irregular for someone ordained for only 12 years, never a rector, to be elected Presiding Bishop. But this is not the first time this has happened. In the fourth century, Ambrose was elected bishop of Milan, and he wasn’t even baptized yet!! He was only a catechumen, in the process... So they hurried up and baptized him so they could consecrate him. The Holy Spirit does work, and if our prayers are offered and aligned with God’s will, God will work what is good, as irregular, odd, and unexpected as it may seem to our eyes.

VI. *We are called to increase and deepen our prayer.*

But however any of us feel about this election—angry, or worried, or fearful, or rejoicing—or any combination of these—the answer for all of us is the same: *prayer*. For God has given us freedom, and consistently does not violate that gift—and just as consistently invites us, *urges us*, to use our freedom to *pray for God’s will: to ask God’s will, and pray for that to be done*.

We are, my brothers and sisters, called to let go of the fear of our circumstances, to let go of our lack of faith, to let go even of our fear that God will answer our prayer in ways too strange and awful for us to understand or accept, even by showing up in person. We are called to focus on God’s will, and to *be about prayer*:

Healing prayer,

Intercessory prayer for the world,

Quiet, centering prayer;

Individual prayer at home, in the morning, in the car, at the dinner table;

Small group prayer;

Vigils at church;

Worship once or more each week.

Because *prayer is our service—our church service*. This is the vow we have taken at our baptism: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the *prayers*. This is our obligatory generosity¹, to give ourselves, as God's priestly people, in prayer for the salvation of the world.

So, my brothers and sisters, let us urgently, in these next 10 years, so critical to our church and to the planet, look to our lives. Where, and how, can you increase or deepen your practice of prayer? Where, and how, can each of us increase and deepen our practice of prayer? Let it be so. And in our practice of prayer for the world, may we also receive, in the troubled waters of our own hearts, Jesus' own blessing: "Peace. Be still." Amen.

(Footnotes)

¹

"Obligatory generosity" is a term used by Marcel Mauss, French sociologist, in his book *The Gift*.

Sermon for St. Paul Episcopal Church, Kansas City, Missouri
July 2, 2006

Rev. Dr. Susan M. Smith

Proper 8, Year B

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

Psalm 112

2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

Mark 5:22-24, 35b-43

—Healing (raising from the dead) of Jairus' daughter

Collect:

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Today's readings are about generosity and healing. But today we also think about *freedom*. For Tuesday is the Fourth of July. Today's flowers are red, white, and blue. And at the end of the service, before [/after] the dismissal, we'll sing together the last hymn in our Hymnal, #720, the National Anthem—both verses.

There is a reason why we celebrate the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day in church. The Europeans who settled here came for the sake of *freedom* of religious expression. The Pilgrims, Puritans, Quakers, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Calvinists, Roman Catholics who settled the Eastern Seaboard came across the Atlantic Ocean, with all the Christian imagery of freedom in their bones—freedom *through the water*. They all knew the story of Noah's family who was saved from sin and death of the flood. They were steeped in the story of the Exodus, when the children of Israel were freed from slavery and given a new life by passing *through the water* of the Red Sea. And all of us die with Christ and are reborn *through the waters of baptism*.

So it was not lost on these early pilgrims that their journey to this continent to freedom was a journey *over the water*! For Jews and (especially) Christians know that freedom comes as a Passover, a passage, through waters. The imagery of the Exodus was carried further, and this great land was considered the New Jerusalem, the City on a Hill, the Promised Land.

When the Pilgrims became Pioneers, the imagery continued as they traveled across the prairie. When the wind blows through the wheat, it is reminiscent of the waves of the ocean. An old Girl Scout song we used to sing expressed this imagery in pioneers leaving from here, Kansas City, heading out west across the prairie "ocean." Listen to the comparison of the Conestoga wagon to a schooner, and the other water imagery:

There's an old prairie schooner, wending its way, over the Santa Fe Trail,
With its captain and crew, looking on, pushing through, over the Santa Fe Trail.
"Anchors aweigh!" at the first break of day—Old Captain Kidd never had it that way.
There's an old prairie schooner, wending its way, over the Santa Fe Trail.

This understanding of freedom and life occurring across the water, including the waters of birth, the waters of baptism, and the river which marks the passage from life to new life, runs deep in the spirit and psyche of all Christian people—and it is this imagery which infuses the early understanding of freedom in this nation's early years.

However, we have changed and diversified in our three-hundred-year history, and this is not the only image of freedom we find now. Let's look at some of the ways freedom is understood since then.

II. FREEDOM—Diverse Definitions

1. A common understanding of "freedom" is that it means having *choices*. The more choices, the more "freedom." This can tend toward an economic understanding. Last year at Saint Paul School of Theology, we had a visit from an African bishop of the Methodist Church, who couldn't get over the number of choices in our grocery stores. Different

brands, sizes, colors, pitted and unpitted, dried, canned, frozen—it was overwhelming. And then he went to a restaurant, and thought he was safe asking for a simple glass of milk—and had to choose between whole, 2%, or skim, small, medium, or large. ☺ For him, multiplicity of choices was not necessarily freedom.

2. A second understanding of freedom was given to a generation of folks by the songwriter Kris Kristofferson in his song “Bobby McGee”, made popular by Janis Joplin: “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” This points to the freedom that comes from simplicity, and from a non-attachment to things. The Buddhists teach us this truth: that it’s our longing, our desire for things and relationships that causes suffering. Kristofferson’s line came from such suffering: he had been alienated from this wife and daughter, and was living in a small apartment—when someone broke in and took most of what little he had. He had literally nothing left, and then realized that he also had nothing left to lose—and a surge of freedom filled his life.¹ A certain *detachment* is indeed freeing.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a profound and spiritually mature definition of freedom. As you know, he was a German Lutheran pastor, a great theologian, (whose hundredth birthday we celebrated this year), whose friends arranged for a post for him at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1939 when the situation in Germany looked dire. He came to the United States—but found he could not be at peace in this safe but distant haven. His place was with his fellow countrymen in their suffering and struggle to correct their course and build a new future together. So he flew back to Germany that same year, and joined a plot against Hitler’s life. He was caught and incarcerated, and killed just before the end of the war. But, oh, his writings from prison are exquisite. He says that *freedom is saying “yes” to what is*. Freedom is accepting the truth and reality of how things are. This is where we differ from the Buddhists. For where they find freedom detached from this life, the Jewish and Christian faiths call us *into* the world—for it is in the very stuff of earthy, creaturely, human life that we find God. God is *with us*, creating and redeeming, always—in the joy and suffering of real people and animals and plants, in real situations, terrible and wonderful. It is in accepting and being present to what actually is that we will find God; for God is Truth and Reality.

4. A fourth way to think about freedom is given to us by Catherine LaCugna in her important book on the Trinity, *God For Us*.² She says that freedom is *being who you were called to be: fulfilling your identity*. This, too, is a deep and spiritually mature freedom that requires living into. It is this kind of freedom that Jesus offered to Jairus’ daughter in today’s Gospel lesson.

III. JESUS—OUR EXAMPLE: Freedom is generous giving.

Jesus is our example, in this and every story, both of how to *give freedom*, and also for how to *be free*. Freedom involves risk-taking—and radical, self-giving love. There is no freedom without sacrifice. *Safety and freedom cannot both be priorities: One must choose*. The Pilgrims and Pioneers, Kris Kristofferson, Bonhoeffer, Jesus—all of them took tremendous risks and gave up much, unto death upon a cross, for freedom for themselves—which always spills over into freedom for others, as well.

Jesus experienced freedom, not in the pseudo-freedom of choices, but in all the other ways:

—he had nowhere to lay his head;

—he utterly accepted the Sanhedrin’s decision

—in his self-giving, risk-taking, radically-loving life, he fulfilled his identity as fully human, and fully divine.

This is an utterly generous self-giving—which always results in freedom.

What changes the meaning of sacrifice for Christians is that Jesus’ life was not taken from him—because *he gave it—freely*.

We are called to live in this radical freedom, so that we can do the same.

IV. FREEDOM FOR US, HERE, NOW

Today we remember the sacrifices of those who passed through the waters—

—of the baptism of birth, and

—of the baptism of death;

who stood up to the King, which was the *right* thing to do, but neither easy nor safe. This is True Freedom.

This is *our legacy*.

Weekly we gather around this table —which is the table of self-giving, risk-taking love:

The Table of Sacrifice

The Table of freedom.

My brothers and sisters, we have a particular responsibility to hold up for this nation the understanding of freedom which the early pilgrims, pioneers and settlers had in mind: the Jewish-Christian understanding of self-giving, risk-taking freedom which is God-given by passage through water. This must be *our* gift to offer, because we are the ones standing in that tradition, bearing that legacy.

Let us love our nation, and all that it stands for. Let us love it by holding up the light before all, the light of those who know that true freedom is that which God gives—neither easy nor safe—but True, life-giving, risky, sacrificing love. For this is the love and freedom which Christ Jesus has given to us—and this is the love and freedom to which God calls us—today, and always.

(Footnotes)

¹ This story comes from an interview with Kristofferson on Public Radio, aired on the occasion of his 70

th

birthday recently (perhaps on

Fresh Air

).

²

Catherine Mowry LaCugna,

God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life

(San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

Sermon for St. Paul Episcopal Church, Kansas City, Missouri

July 9, 2006

Rev. Dr. Susan M. Smith

Proper 9, Year B—For the Website

Ezekiel 2:1-7 —Call of Ezekiel. Eat the scroll.

Psalm 123:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 —"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Mark 6:1-6 —A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.

Collect:

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

O God, make your Word sweet unto us, that we may proclaim it, embody it, and do it, in your Name. Amen.

The Gospel today sounds like the Cinderella story! The people who supposedly know you the best, are often not the ones to appreciate your uniqueness. The townspeople "knew" Jesus—which is to say, they had *categorized him*. They had gotten used to him *as he was* back then when he was the carpenter's son, and they had been forgiving when he had made them tools and furniture with flaws. They could predict his behavior, humor, relationships with folks.

And now he was different. That authority. And acting uppity, trying to heal people. And then some of the folks actually got well—it'll go to that boy's head. Kid too big for his britches. Forgot where he came from.

It happened with Martin Luther, too—forgetting his place, acting like an authority about those indulgences, and treating the lay people with all that respect.

And with John Wesley. He was an Anglican priest, but pulpit after pulpit was closed to him because he was so *enthusiastic*. He *aroused* people! Holy Spirit this, Holy Spirit that, talking about grace and salvation all the time as if he and Jesus were best friends. Shameful, really.

This Gospel is difficult—but it's one we recognize. We go home, and it isn't our hopes and accomplishments people respond to—it's who we were as a little kid. We may get the same teasing now as then. It's as though people don't notice we've grown up and developed a life.

And God is always calling us to become what we aren't yet—to do a new thing. It's difficult to be the only one thinking what we think or doing what we do. It would be nice to have some support. We may tend to look for that support among our closest kin and neighbors—even though we may be least likely to find it there. I just saw a presentation on John Wesley last night, and I learned that from the time he was in seminary, Wesley felt he lived with two uninvited guests: ridicule and persecution. According to today's Gospel, if we step outside of people's expectations, and speak and act with authority, that ridicule and persecution are likely to come from those in our closest circles.

THE CORINTHIANS lesson tells us we are weak, and suggests we'll receive insults and persecution. And in EZEKIEL, we read that the prophet was asked to eat the scroll of God's word—which would be received by many as Lamentation and Woe. He would proclaim it, but they would refuse to hear it. Don't worry about living among scorpions and briars and thorns, Ezekiel—just eat my words and proclaim them to others.

—So why, I ask you, would any of us *choose*, in our right minds, to be followers of Jesus Christ? Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition. And it's not usually the funnest job in town. Either they *won't like what you're saying* and try to shut you up, like with Ezekiel; or worse, try to kill you, like with Elijah (I Kings 19)—and Jesus—and Martin Luther King, Jr.; or they *listen to you and do what you say*, and your whole world is changed (like with Jonah).

We all eat somebody's words. We are here today because we are prepared to eat the Word of God—which we will do, not by ingesting a scroll, but at the Table of the Lord. We stand, with Jesus Christ, in the prophetic tradition, *hearing* (with all of ourselves) God's Word, ingesting it—and then proclaiming it, embodying it, and doing it.

But then what? When you put these lessons together, it doesn't exactly sound like Good News. Why ever would we want to eat God's words, if the result of becoming what we eat will be ridicule and persecution, and our neighbors trying to throw us off a cliff?

II. THE GLORY OF THE LORD

There's more to the Ezekiel story which gives us part of an answer. *Before* God asks Ezekiel to eat the scroll, God gives him a vision: There are mysterious creatures with multiple wings and the faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle [which we Christians have taken as the symbols of the four evangelists (Gospel-writers)]; and they are connected with the ground by wheels, with eyes on their rims, so that they can move in any direction. And over the creatures is a dome as of crystal; and over the dome is a throne, made of sapphire. And on the throne is a figure of a man dazzling, with light the brightness and intensity of bronze in the midst of a fire. And Scripture says it was the presence of the glory of God. (Ez 1:1-28a).

God first gives us something wondrous and powerful that thrills our hearts and impassions us—a vision of the world here or the world beyond which we will never forget, and which informs and sustains all our life work. Such a powerful experience gives us the longing and desire and connection with God which makes anything, *everything*, possible. It gives us joy and gladness—so much so that the threat of persecution is as of nothing. Wesley was full of passion for the Lord, and his “enthusiasm” got him barred from Anglican pulpits all over 18th century England. But that didn't stop him. He preached standing on his father's grave, and in the streets and fields.

In a book entitled *Exuberance, the Passion for Life*, psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison¹ gives many examples of people on fire with the gifts God gave them. Wilson Bentley, for example, was a New England farmer who *loved snowflakes*. It is because of “Snowflake” Bentley's photomicrography that we know that each snowflake is unique, and that they all have six sides. “His delight in snow made him an astute observer of it; it then made him an infectiously enthusiastic guide. Exuberance [and joy in God's snowflakes] gave him passion, stamina, and a lasting voice to speak out for small beauties” (pp. 32-33).

“The Joy of the Lord is our strength” —and it gives us the strength to proclaim God's Truth.

There are people in this congregation on fire with the Word of God nurturing their inmost souls. *Rich Ellison* has more ideas for social service than he has hands or hours to accomplish them.

Caryn Seaton not only prays for the homeless each week during the prayers of the people, but she knits baby blankets for their children.

Melissa Jackson has a program for working with parents & neighbors to combat racism in our city.

Becky Wood and Keith Grafing are on fire with presentations on work and theology in the adult forum, beginning today for the rest of the month.

There are *attorneys* in this congregation who stand for the Truth with courage and boldness, in lonely ways we don't even know.

III. THE CHURCH

This, perhaps, is why we have the Church—and why the theology of *adoption* is so important in Christianity.

The Church is an *alternative family*—just as the disciples were to Jesus, when his kin rejected him.

The Church supplies intimacy but not familiarity—so there's room for people to grow and change, even change *radically*—which is good, since God is continually expanding us, as far as we're willing to grow.

The Church supplies others to share our passions, receive our gifts, and participate together in ministry.

In the Church, when any one of us is acting, it is done on behalf of all of us.

The Church is a family which encourages us to stretch into the fullness of what God created us to be and to do.

We must *support each other and encourage each other*.

And when you are in need of support—when you're flagging, feeling ridiculed and weak, *call each other and yes, ASK for support*—for this is central to our work and identity.

IV. St. Paul's is PREPARING FOR NEW MINISTRY

Our new rector, Stan Runnels, is sizing up our gifts and passions, and learning about our neighborhood. Let us prepare to be open to the invitations for ministry which will come from him—by beginning to listen and invite and encourage one another in the ministries already happening—which we may not have even thought of as ministry in the name of Christ.

All this is important because the pressures to be quiet about what we do are tremendous. The pressures to *not try anything* are ponderous. This weekend I was at a reunion of Red Cross workers who served in Vietnam. One guy was talking with great knowledge about the water problem in the nation. Now this is a group with courage and understanding, energy and guts—but *no one knows what to do*. In the face of the bigger problems, it's not clear how one person—or even one congregation—can make a difference—or what difference exactly needs to be made.

However, we are not called to *solve* the problems, however, but only to *faithfully use the gifts* God gave us, and to *be obedient to what God calls us to do*. Even though Bill Beachy is not here, I don't think he'd mind if I told his story of faithful obedience. He read a Scripture passage which said we should align our prayer with God's will, praying for what God wants. It dawned on him that he didn't know what God wants! Well, of course, we all know in general what God wants... But Bill began to pray, asking what God wanted him to pray for (—a meta-prayer.). And he heard, "Clergy need to pray together." So Bill began to pray for clergy to pray together. And he set up a weekly prayer time, and invited clergy to come and pray.

No one came. But he kept praying, and was faithful to the prayer time... and no one came. He called and invited individuals and added prayer times... and no one came. For months he was faithful in prayer and meeting, all alone.

But eventually, 3 Presbyterian pastors came. They prayed together regularly.

And eventually, one of them started an off-shoot prayer ministry—and that weekly prayer group now has hundreds of folks, clergy and laity, coming to pray! And this group is a major sponsor of the 24-7 prayer ministry, prayer vigils for 24-hours a day in prayer rooms all over this city, where a church keeps vigil for a month, and then passes the candle on to another parish for constant prayer. **HUNDREDS OF CLERGY PRAYING!** God, I'm sure, is smiling.

V. HEALING IS OUR MINISTRY—ALL OF US

Bill has said that the ministry of healing prayer is not *a* ministry of the Church, but is *the* ministry of the Church. Jesus changed people's lives in healing, and that ministry has continued to change lives for 2000 years—it's humbling.

Today is the 2nd Sunday, when we have healing prayer at the font during Communion. Today we are blessed to have two people to pray with us, both of whom have sat at Bill Beachy's feet: *Kitty Steed* of Visitation parish, a spiritual director in our town, and *Sue McCalley* of this parish, who will offer prayers at the font during communion.

Healing is Bill Beachy's passion. It is his vision of the presence of the glory of the Lord. Nothing will stop him in this work, which he loves—and his ministry is extending outward like ripples on a pond, and is blessing all of us.

What is your passion? Who will you invite to accompany you? Who will you offer to accompany in *their* prophetic call from God?

VI. GOOD NEWS, AS SWEET AS HONEY

But there's yet more to Ezekiel's story than was given to us today. As Ezekiel is eating the scroll, he finds that it is to him as sweet as honey. The word which to some will be received as lamentation and woe, is to God's person a word as sweet as honey.

We are in the same boat as Ezekiel. We, too, come each week to eat the Word of God—not in a scroll, but in bread and wine. It is a Word of passion for us, in every way. It is Christ Jesus. And we eat this bread, proclaim it, and do it, *together*. It is a joy! It is grace. We may be weak, but together, the Holy Spirit makes power in us. Come to the Table, O Mortals, fellow prophets of the Lord, and eat the Word.

Come— taste and see the sweet goodness of God's Word! *Amen.*

(Footnotes)

¹ (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).