

This will be what's called a teaching sermon.

I'll begin with the propers for today.

In the early church they fought over which gifts were most important. How was it that the church stayed grounded and connected, stayed united, and did not splinter apart?

In the gospel today Peter is raised up as the rock, the foundation. How does that come about? How is it that Jesus makes this decision?

Both have to do with the strategy Jesus used in shaping the church. We see the same strategy in the fields of organization development and community organizing. It's also what comes to us in Anglican pastoral theology.

I'll share some of that now so we might be more aware of what are often hidden dynamics in every parish church.

There are two phrases I'd like you to hear as we go along. Each points to an important aspect of Anglican practice.

- "Power from the center pervades the whole."
- "We grow by a mix of acceptance and challenge."

A critical mass approach

Jesus has a strategy in mind as he goes about his work of creating a church. And make no mistake here. He is intentionally and systematically setting about developing a body that will live after him.

Look at what Jesus does in shaping the church.

He doesn't focus on large numbers; his attention is mostly on the twelve and a few others.

Let me return to today's readings.

Paul assumes that the Church in Rome can cope with the tensions over differences because he knows there is a faithful, disciplined core. Such a center influences and grounds the whole congregation.

It is because Jesus has spent so much time with the twelve that he knows to select Peter for a special leadership role.

Bishop Charles Gore describes it this way: “The crowds press upon Jesus, the merciful and wonderful healer: but He appears to be as far as possible from wishing to make a multitude of converts on easy terms, ... On the whole it is evident that His aim is not present success or numbers of adherents, but the preparation of a solid nucleus of men and women...” “to the multitude he speaks in parables ... only a few, whom he sees as capable of earnest self sacrifice, of perseverance, of enlightenment, are gradually initiated into His secrets. ... these he trains with slow and patient care.”¹

This isn't about being exclusive, it is about what will work. His focus on the small circle of disciples is for the sake of the crowds. He is creating an instrument to save all people.

There's a critical mass strategy in play. A core of twelve plus a few, 70 others whom he sends “ahead of him in pairs,” then the 5000.² But his focus is with the twelve plus a few. One researcher says that 70% of his teaching as recorded in the Gospels was given privately to the twelve.

This is what Jesus did in the process of shaping what was to become the Holy Catholic Church. Develop and form those closest in, those at the center—spend time with them, showing, modeling, eating and talking. Jesus does teach the crowds, he does show the power of God's compassion and kindness by healing individuals. But it is with those he has selected that he focuses his attention.³

There's an article in today's NY Times on the role of nuns in Catholic hospitals. It's about how there are fewer and fewer involved. In 1968 almost all of the 770 Catholic hospitals had nuns or priests as the chief executive. Now there are eight.

The concern is about whether, over time, the approach that has guided the treatment of patients and employees can withstand bottom-line forces without the day-to-day presence of the sisters.

“Surveys...show that, on average, [Catholic hospitals] provide higher-quality performance than other hospitals and are more likely to offer specialty services that are not profit centers.” There's more concentration on serving the poor. A commitment that healing would prevail over profit; an emphasis on the “dignity of patients, paying blue-collar workers above scale, making her hospitals smoke-free” and being environmentally responsible.

Sister Mary Jean, who is now retiring from leading one of the largest health systems in the nation, defined what the nuns brought to the hospitals. “ ‘There is this thing called presence,’ ...she was trained to see Jesus in the face of every patient.”⁴

How does this work in the parish church?

Martin Thornton was the leading Anglican pastoral theologian of the past 100 years. He had a phrase that summed up how Christ continues to feed his parish churches—

“power from the center pervades the whole.” He described the process as like a heart beat in which life-giving blood is pumped throughout the body; holiness and love pour forth into the whole Body of the parish.⁵

An assumption of Anglican pastoral theology is that for the parish to be healthy there needs to be adequate attention first to those most proficient, most competent in the spiritual life.⁶ And if that’s done well enough—“power from the center pervades the whole.” But if those of what I call a more apostolic faith do not receive enough nurture from the clergy or an adequate amount of program resources, they will seek all that outside the parish. And in going outside the parish to be fed they will play a diminished role in the parish. The power from the center will be weaker, as though there was some blockage in the arteries.

Now in some ways this seems backward, doesn’t it? It would seem to some that it would make more sense for the parish to concentrate on the most immature and tentative; or even on those who rarely participate in the Eucharist.

But when a parish does that, what happens is not increased health. Instead of the power of holiness and love radiating from the center and resulting in a faithful and vibrant community, we find exhaustion and resentment.

This is in the end a very inclusive strategy. It assumes differences that are accepted with boundaries that are gray or fuzzy (one person said permeable). Let me give you an example.

At one time I was Vicar of St. Elisabeth’s Church in South Philadelphia. It was in an old city neighborhood with brick row houses, narrow streets, and corner stores. While shopping in one of the tiny grocery stores, I was moving along the constricted aisles seeking a can of tomato sauce. In the next aisle two women were leaning into one another, whispering. The one said, “He’s my priest, I belong to St. Elisabeth’s.” I had no idea who she was. I never did see her at Mass. But I also have no doubt that she felt a connection and that for her that was an expression of Christian faith and practice.⁷

This Anglican pastoral strategy assumes that the power from the center will draw others deeper into faith by its life-giving energy, by its love and by its holiness. That this attraction of holiness and real life will both create a more vibrant parish, which will in turn invite new people to it.

What about the rest of us – most of us?

We get to be where we are and who we are. If what is real for us is that we are rather tentative about spiritual practice then that’s where we are. And that’s fine. Or any of the other possible ways of being on this journey—we may be newly excited about faith and be ready to try new spiritual practices, or we may be in a fairly

stable routine that fits what's most comfortable for us, or we may be in the process of progressing into ways that will stretch us.

So, how do we grow in the spiritual life?

The core pastoral strategy is to **accept** people where they are *and* to **invite** them to move beyond where they are. What that might mean for each of us is this—accept yourself where you are now, trust that God loves you as you are now; and also, know that times will come when God is calling you to go deeper and further, to go into a new place.

We human beings being who we are can't help but look at a list like this and wonder, am I immature, am I tentative? We engage in judgment—of others and ourselves. And because of this we need to take two stances regarding our spiritual life.

Two things about spiritual growth—First is the need to start by simply acknowledging where we are. The second is to accept that God is not finished with us.

An illustration of how acceptance and invitation works in our life

First let me thank you. I noticed how many people decided to mill about in coffee hour last week, to put on a nametag. One of our most introverted members reported speaking with a visitor and enjoying it.

Please let's not push this too far. Most of us at Trinity are introverts, we need our space, we need our time with those we know best. So, you may want to give yourself permission to only mill every other Sunday. If we need to do this corporately we could get some old quarantine signs. Or make up signs that we post once a month, "VISITORS: enter at your own risk."

I know that God loves my introvert soul. I also know that God invites me, at times challenges me, to go further. I am invited to stretch myself, to be part of community.

I trust that in God's mercy I'm not being asked to become an extravert and that those of you that are extraverts are not asked to become introverts. But as the communion of saints and the Company of Heaven move toward their fullness and completion, I know that God also asks of us that we go beyond what is just comfortable. That the good of the person in front of us now, and the common good, are to be real considerations in our thinking and behavior.

Extraverts are invited to become more reflective, to develop their inner life, and to increase the capacity for stillness and silence. And we introverts are called to allow our circle of acquaintance and companionship to stretch beyond those we met in

third grade. At coffee hour we are on occasion to speak to people beyond our usual circle.

For each of us, for you and for me, there is this paradoxical invitation—am I to stay in the places of spiritual life I find familiar, that work for me; because God is present in those places? Or am I to stretch into new places, trusting that God is present in the new place as well?

In Christ. Amen.

¹ Charles Gore, *The Church and the Ministry*, Chapter 1

² You can see the general shape of it in Luke 9 and 10. It also appears in the work of others over the years. You can see the same orientation when Bishop Kilmer Myers wrote in *Light the Dark Streets*, “One possible definition for a parish is that it is God’s way of meeting the problems of the unloved. This meeting between God and the unloved, the unwanted, takes place in the preaching of the Word, in the Sacraments, in the social life of the parish made possible by the climate of acceptance which is engendered by those who have been baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith. One of the main tasks of the parish priest is to train the militant core of his parishioners in such a way that they understand as fully as possible the true nature of a Christian parish.”

³ Formation is in relationship to purpose – if he has come that we might have life, if he has come to unite us to one another and to God – then the processes of formation will serve that purpose.

⁴ NY Times August 21, 2011, “Nuns, a ‘Dying Breed,’ Fade from Leadership Roles at Catholic Hospitals”

⁵ In *Pastoral Theology: A Reorientation* Martin Thornton presented his understanding of the parish church as the Body of Christ, “the complete Body in microcosm,” (p. 19) and his Remnant Concept, “in which power from the center pervades the whole.” (p. 21) The holiness and love of a Remnant at the center of parish life is for Thornton what makes a parish a true parish. In describing how the Remnant Concept works he writes: “This palpitating heart pumps the blood of life to all the body as leaven leavens the lump or salt savours the whole.” (p. 23)

When a parish has a healthy and productive Shape you see a definite movement. People are drawn into a deeper relationship with God and the church. There is a sense of spiritual movement in the parish.

⁶ Critical mass models draw the attention of leaders away from obsessing about “fixing” the problems and dysfunction at the edges and toward building the center. We can all too easily find our attention drawn toward the “difficult people” or those who constantly demand personal attention. A critical mass model suggests that we give much more of our time and energy to developing the center by equipping those already of Apostolic Faith and those ready to move in that direction.

⁷ From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, R. A. Gallagher, “What I do know is that the parish had a long-standing link with people in that community. The parish was nearly 100 years old. During the 1920s it had celebrated the Eucharist in Italian. Copies of the Italian 1928 Book of Common Prayer were still in the parish office. During the depression it had used up its endowment to provide heating oil for people in the neighborhood. When there was a parish fair the games for children were conducted on the principle of having every child win a prize every time. The prizes were worth more than the quarter the child paid to play. We lost fifteen cents every time the game was played. We ran a summer day camp for children, sponsored a community education center, and helped form a neighborhood community organization.”