

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Tate on 14 Pentecost, Sunday, September 10, 2017, at Christ Church, Media, PA.

## I.

In the Gospel passage this morning, Jesus gives a remarkable, unforgettable, description of the Church. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” The disciples would not understand the full meaning of this until after Jesus’ death and resurrection, until after they had experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What Jesus is trying to tell them is that, in the future, for all time, whenever two or three of his followers gather together in his name, that he, the resurrected Christ, would be spiritually present with them, through the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

Years later, St. Paul gave us the perfect metaphor for what Jesus was trying to convey: “We are the Body of Christ.” According to St. Paul, we are called to continue Christ’s presence and Christ’s ministry in the world.

The point is that Jesus never founded a church, in the sense of a human institution. That came centuries later. Jesus never gave his disciples by-laws, or articles of incorporation. He never told them to erect buildings or elect vestries.

As one theologian has put it, Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God, and what we got instead was the Church. Similarly, Michael Curry, the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, constantly reminds us that Jesus came, not to found an institution, but to start a movement. In Curry’s words, we are part of the Episcopal expression of that Jesus Movement.

And who did Jesus chose as leaders in his movement? Fishermen, tax collectors, totally ordinary men and women. This continued a tradition going back into ancient Judaism. Most of the great figures of the Old Testament, beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and down through the kings and the prophets, were incredibly ordinary people. The last few weeks we have been hearing the stories of God calling Moses to liberate the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Six different times Moses tries to turn the job down, protesting that he is not smart enough, not eloquent enough, not strong enough to do the job. Moses finally agrees to go only when he understands that God will give him everything he needs to do the job, such as in the Passover story we heard in today’s first lesson.

From the first disciples of Jesus down to the present, the most effective leaders in the Jesus Movement have been ordinary, fallible men and women who understood that true spiritual leadership is not about them, but about Jesus Christ working through them.

## II.

Today is an important day for this community of faith, Christ Church, Media, as the entire parish gets involved this morning in the discernment process of calling of a new Rector. I am honored to be working with you as a facilitator and consultant.

Note that I deliberately refer to a “discernment process” and not simply a search. Corporations conduct a search and then hire a Chief Executive Officer who signs a contract. Often this involves a promotion from within the corporation. Even if the search goes outside, it can usually be done in a few months.

The Church is very different. Parishes engage in a discernment process to better understand themselves and to try to identify the person that God wants at this particular time to lead them into the future that God is preparing for this parish. At the same time, priests who may be interested in being Rector of Christ Church are going through a discernment process of their own to try to sense where God wants them to

serve next. Parishes go through this discernment process and then call a priest into a mutual relationship that is more like a marriage covenant than a contract.

This process cannot and should not be done quickly. It normally takes at least a year, sometimes longer. In my experience, parishes that try to short-cut this discernment process almost always come to regret it.

The church has specially trained clergy, called Interims, to lead parishes through this time of transition. You have one of the best, in Nancy Deming. You are allowed to fall in love with her, but I would remind you that according to the rules and policies of the Episcopal Church, she cannot be a candidate for Rector.

The church also has specially trained consultants, like me, to work with Vestries and Discernment/Search Committees through this transition. To introduce myself, my name is Robert Tate. For fifteen years I was the Rector of the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, in Chestnut Hill, and for the past seven years I have been serving on staff at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral. I have been a discernment/search consultant for over 20 parishes in the Diocese.

### III.

There are real challenges for any parish conducting a discernment process in 2017. The Episcopal Church, along with all mainline denominations in the United States, has been in steady decline for decades. The average Sunday attendance of an Episcopal parish has declined from over 100 two decades ago to around 50 today. That is the average. The average Episcopal church can no longer afford to call a Rector. Well over half of Episcopal parishes in the United States are now staffed by part-time clergy. Here in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, over half of the 130 parishes are staffed by retired clergy, drawing a pension, who can by rule only work half-time. And another quarter of the parishes are staffed by Priests-in-Charge, who are by definition not full time.

On the clergy side, the average age of an active Episcopal priest is 59. In part that is because so many retired clergy are continuing to cover parishes. But it is also because the average age of ordination in the Episcopal Church is stuck in the late 40's, 48 for women, who are over half of our ordinands, and 45 for men. We have tried to encourage earlier vocations, but with little success, in large part because with the costs of seminary so high, with little assistance available from Dioceses or parishes, and with no hope of paying back student loans out of modest clergy salaries, the only people applying for ordination are those with successful first careers who are able to pay seminary tuition, room and board out of their own savings.

The good news for Christ Church, Media, is that in this difficult context, you are in a remarkably good position. You are a spiritually healthy, financially strong parish that is absolutely in a position to call a new Rector. My prediction is that you will have many first-rate, highly qualified, experienced applicants for the position.

But you will not get the Messiah. You will not get the perfect priest. You will not get the priest you probably have in mind. What do I mean by this? Every parish I have worked with starts by imagining a 45-50 year old, often male, straight, priest, with previous experience as a Rector, married, with young or teenage children who will be involved in the parish, and a spouse with an independent, portable career and income, and ideally with their own health insurance. These parishes are imagining a unicorn. A mythical figure who does not exist in reality. Do the math. If the average age of ordination is the late forties, priests in their late 40's or early 50's with experience as a rector are pretty rare. And if the priest has to be male, which I know is not the case here at Christ Church, the parish has just eliminated over half the pool. And if the priest has to be straight, the parish has just eliminated many of the very best clergy in the Episcopal church.

The good news is that there are a lot of superb Episcopal clergy. They are not looking for a job but they are looking for a challenge, for a genuine call from God.

So the key is to go into this discernment process with as few preconceptions as possible. Trust the Holy Spirit.

#### IV,

Jesus said: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

As we embark on this discernment process over the next year at Christ Church, Media, let us remember these words of Jesus. Let us do this discernment work prayerfully, in his name. Let us do this discernment work openly and honestly, trusting that the truth will set us free. And let us do this discernment work faithfully, trusting that God will lead us into the future that God is preparing for Christ Church — and its new Rector.

In Christ’s name we pray,

Amen