

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA

Proper 6, Year A, June 18, 2017

The Rev. Bill Queen

“Spreading the Kingdom”

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:8-23; *Book of Common Prayer*

Catechism (page 856)

in Genesis today we see Abraham and Sarah responding to strangers who show up at their tent; and it turns out that those strangers were representatives of God, and that they brought special blessings to the lives of Abraham and Sarah partly because of the hospitality they offered; the passage is so important that the book of Hebrews (13:2) will later refer to it as it gives this instruction, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it”

in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” and then sends his disciples out to spread his work; think about how the harvest is something that feeds and sustains us; so you can see that the theme running through both of these readings is the idea of how we are blessed by looking outward and by going outward; by being hospitable to others and how we benefit by continuing Jesus’ ministries in the world

there is a question from our *Book of Common Prayer’s* Catechism (page 856) that addresses this same theme as it asks, “What is the duty of all Christians?”; the answer is partly this: “The duty of all Christians is to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God”; now I want to commend you for how you already have responded to this duty, as I have seen firsthand just how much all of you do work, pray, and give to this parish and to many other worthy charitable organizations; but the optimal word I want to draw your attention to is the word “spread”; working, praying, and giving for the maintaining of the kingdom of God is not the same thing as working, praying, and giving for the spreading of the kingdom of God; and the difference is not just one of amounts of dollars or time commitments; it is a difference of mindset

we give of ourselves and of our resources to this parish out of our love and care for this parish family; but this family, as it is currently constituted, is just the starting point; this church, its buildings, its activities, its sense of

community is a treasure not meant for us to hoard and keep for ourselves; like all of God's gifts, it is a treasure meant to be shared with ever widening circles of people

overall we normally, and naturally, plan activities that meet our needs, offered around the times of day and days of the week that work best for us; it is a totally different approach to think about the activities that might meet the needs of other people, on days and times that might fit their schedules; again, what I'm talking about is a change of mindset, is a different way of looking at why we do our ministries and for whom do we do our ministries; there are literally thousands of churches across the country, of Episcopal and of every other denomination, who are withering away and shutting their doors; maybe you saw the article about this in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* yesterday; and look right here in Petersburg and in Walnut Hill, where long-standing congregations have closed

Christ and Grace is in a relatively stable position now, but there is no guarantee it will stay that way unless we can become more focused on those who are not yet a part of this parish; maybe you have heard the oft-repeated, and true, phrase "the church exists primarily for those that do not as yet belong to it;" to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God effectively requires us to think and to plan exactly how we are going to spread of the kingdom of God in this community; for example: I'm going to discuss with the Vestry tomorrow night how we might make the annual Blessing of the Pets this fall (attendance last year was 14 parishioners, maybe we could get 14 neighbors too) open to the community, in a way that would engage us with our neighbors in a new way and invite them to become a part of us for Sunday worship and other activities throughout the rest of the year; and not just invite them to our existing activities, but to come up with new activities that will be attractive to them

I want to make sure that everyone understands that what I'm talking about is not a survival strategy; I'm not saying we need more people so that they can help cover the costs we're now having to cover by ourselves—that would be a selfish approach at best and an unchristian approach at worst; spreading the kingdom of God ultimately is exposing ourselves to new people and to their new ideas—it is entertaining angels and it is sending laborers into the harvest; and we can't even imagine in what ways the presence of new and different people will bring us new blessings; the African-American author,

educator, civil rights leader, and theologian Howard Thurman has wisely said: “community cannot feed on itself. It can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond—their unknown and undiscovered brothers (and sisters)” (from *The Search For Common Ground: An Inquiry into The Basis of Man's Experience of Community*); the only way our parish will find and welcome these as yet undiscovered brothers and sisters will be to think and act differently in our placing of priorities and in our planning of ministries

in whatever roles you play in our church activities, try to put yourself, and help others put themselves, into this mindset of spreading and growing—of considering who is not yet part of our church community, and what we might do differently to attract them and to welcome them

recall that in my first sermon here I used the prayer, “glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory to God from generation to generation”; we need to work, to pray, to give, to think, and to plan in such a way that all of our activities are preparing us for a larger future; one that stretches our imaginations; one that trusts God; one that will reach out to new groups of people right now, as well as to the generations to come; we can only do that by more than just maintaining God’s kingdom; we can only do that by spreading God’s kingdom