

Isaiah 55:1-13  
Psalm 19:7-14  
2 Corinthians 4:1-10  
John 15:1-11

A. Katherine Grieb  
Diocese of Kentucky  
Church Convention  
February 22, 2007

Please join me in the prayer that comes from our Psalmist: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

Dear people of God in the Diocese of Kentucky, what a joy it is to be with you today and to celebrate with you new ministries and renewed ministries, the gathering of friends and co-workers, workshops and other learning opportunities, truly a time for seeing visions and dreaming dreams as we prepare our hearts and minds this Lent for the great three days and then the great fifty days from the Sunday of the Resurrection to the Commemoration of the Giving of the Holy Spirit. I am deeply honored to be here and I thank you for this invitation with all my heart.

The lessons you have just heard are the propers for a Church Convention and, hearing them, you could get the distinct impression that the Word of God in all its rich variety lies at the very center of what we are about here. The Psalmist celebrates the law of the Lord, the testimony of the Lord, the statutes of the Lord, the commandment of the Lord, the judgments of the Lord, which are more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold, and sweeter than honey in the honeycomb.

Isaiah urges the people of Israel to seek the Lord while he wills to be found, call upon him when he draws near. Return to the Lord to seek mercy and pardon and to confess that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts; God’s ways are not our ways; God’s thoughts and God’s ways are as high above ours as the heavens are higher than the earth. The distance between God and humanity seems unbridgable: we are indicted by the Word for our false words and our false selves; we are summoned by the Word to give an account of our many failings.

But then, by that same Word, comes the word of promise: you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. The elders among us will remember Julie Andrews: the hills are alive with the sound of music; and those of us who are younger will have fun imagining the hills trying to do the bougaloo and the trees doing the bump.

How does the Word of God hold these two aspects of itself together, the indicting Word and the inviting Word? the distant far-away Word and the Word of love that is closer to us than we are to ourselves? Almost unbelievably, in God’s grace, it is the Word of God itself that leaps the gap like lightning from heaven to earth, or as Isaiah puts it, like rain and snow that come from the heavens to water the earth, making it fertile, bringing forth new life in it, making it sprout.

God says, through the prophet: So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish that which I have purposed and prosper in that for which I sent it. No more the thorns and thistles that plagued Adam the gardener, but cyprus and myrtle, signs of God’s blessing, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

The powerful permanent Word of God, that’s what these lessons celebrate. As Isaiah says elsewhere, “the people are grass; our constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers,

the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.”

Ash Wednesday reminds us of our own mortality; so does the wonderful poem by Mary Oliver that begins “Tell me....” (She’s referencing the end of the book of Job, I think.)

Tell me...  
Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?  
[Source: “The Summer Day” in *New and Selected Poems*]

It is at this point that I hear the text that reached out and grabbed me as I worked on this sermon: “apart from me you can do nothing.” Do you remember Jesus’ words from the Gospel? “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” Tomorrow I hope we can talk about Paul and the importance of Pauline ecclesiology for the Anglican Communion today. I hope we can come back to the theology of the cross we heard in the lesson from 2 Corinthians. It’s good to be reminded that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. But for now, let’s hear what John has to tell us in conversation with the Psalmist and Isaiah. Isn’t it striking how the lessons today move from the power of the Word of God to our powerlessness apart from it?

Or perhaps I should say, our powerlessness apart from *him*. The systematic theologians remind us that properly speaking in Christian discourse, in the grammar of theology, Jesus Christ is the Word of God. He is the Word of God made flesh, full of grace and truth. It is Jesus Christ who is both the lightning bolt from heaven in his full divinity and the lightning rod from earth that catches all that power in his full humanity. He is the one who leaps the gap from heaven to earth for our salvation. He is the effective Word of God who carries out God’s purpose and returns again to God.

The theologians remind us that it is only in a secondary way that Scripture, as it witnesses to Jesus Christ, is also the Word of God, and that preaching and prophecy can also, by God’s grace, bear witness to the Word of God about which the Scriptures speak. Apart from that Word made flesh we can do nothing. This is the Word that says to us, “you have already been cleansed by the

word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

What happens to branches that separate themselves from the vine? They die. They wither away. They don't bear fruit, they dry up. They might as well be thrown into the fire; they're not alive any more. They are the Johannine equivalent of the salt that has lost its saltiness; they're worthless.

Whoa, that's got my attention. Who wants to be living a ministry that looks alive but is really dead, like the sad joke about the guy that was buried yesterday but had been dead for the last twenty years? I don't think clergy and lay leaders are exempt from this danger. So how can we tell if we're still connected to the vine, if we're still alive, if we're still getting that lifegiving spark from the Word of God that grows things and heals things and births new things? I'm not sure, but I can point to one thing that I think may be a useful indicator and there is considerable collective wisdom in this room that can help identify other signs of connection and disconnection.

The sign of connectedness I want to mention is a sense of gratitude. Thomas Merton says that to be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us -- and God has given us everything.... Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise the goodness of God.” We pray for our baptismal candidates that they may be given the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. Joy and wonder are signs of grace, they are signs of being connected to the vine.

Wendell Berry on miracles helps me with this. I know he's from Kentucky and he's part of the wonderful people that you are. Being connected to the vine enables us to see the miracles that are happening all around us that other people just can't see, unless we help by pointing some of them out. Wendell Berry says,

The miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread. Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine -- which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.

Poets like Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry help us to see our radical dependence on the Word of God, how absolutely vital it is for us to stay connected to the source of our power for living and for doing. What good is a toaster, or any other appliance you can think of, if it's unplugged, if it doesn't have surging through its veins that electricity, that lightning Word of God that makes the hills and mountains sing for joy and the trees of the field clap their hands?

So you are wise to come together in Diocesan Convention, to remind yourselves and one another of the many reasons to give thanks to God and the many ways in which God's beauty and power are seen among us, and to stitch yourselves and one another ever closer to that lifegiving vine -- for apart from him we can do nothing and we are nothing.

Thank God that God does not will to be God apart from us, and that even in our separation and our deadness, God loved us so much that we are made new, filled with God's loving power, and

sent out into the world as ambassadors of God's gracious Word. May this be a rich time for you, a time of reconnecting to that vital force that is God's Word made flesh and dwelling among us still.