

Diocese of Central PA, January 26, 2011, Evensong, Mission of the Church
I

Good evening Bishop Baxter, clergy and laity of the Diocese, guests and family members, these two parish choirs and especially Ted and Robyn. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you this evening. When Bishop Baxter called me to issue this invitation before Christmas he said he wished to have a preacher experienced in diocesan staff work who could inform, inspire and challenge all of you about the mission of the Church.

As Bishop Baxter was speaking to me about what he wished I was reminded of a story about a 60 year-old married couple celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary. Along with the usual bumps in the road their marriage had been quite happy and mutually rewarding and they were having dinner and celebrating with a special bottle of vintage wine. The bottle was a bit more special than they expected when out of the bottle popped a genie. The genie said that because they both had worked so faithfully for 40 years to create a strong marriage he was going to give them each one wish. The wife hesitated not at all. She wanted to visit the Taj Mahal, the pyramids of Egypt and the Great Wall of China. Instantly there was a bright “poof” and the genie handed her two tickets for a round-the world tour. The husband was more thoughtful. At last he said to his wife that he loved her deeply and hoped she wouldn’t be offended by his wish, but that this was for him a unique opportunity. He told the genie that he wished for a wife that was 30 years younger. Both the wife and the genie were stunned and shocked. The genie asked the husband if he was sure of his wish. When the husband said yes, there was another bright “poof” and there sat the husband, now 92 years old. I guess the moral of the story is be careful what you wish for.

To give the Bishop his wish and still be brief I will address only two challenges that I suspect face not only the Bishop, his staff, but also the clergy and laity of this diocese. The two challenges are authority and trust. They are both a bit tricky to understand and they are both difficult to exercise.

In tonight’s lesson from the letter to the Ephesians the theme of unity which has run through the previous chapters of the epistle breaks forth into the open. Christians are called to play a part in the fulfillment of God’s design for the universe. God’s design is for the reconciliation of all parts of the universe that are estranged and for their ultimate unity. To the extent that we Christians exhibit unity with one another we prefigure the ultimate

unity of all things and at the same time provide an impetus to begin the process of reconciliation. We are to seek and keep this unity in the “bond of peace” by cultivating those qualities which lead to harmony among people: lowliness, meekness, patience and forbearance. Furthermore unity within the church does not consist in uniformity, but with a diversity of gifts such that every believer is fitted to make his or her own contribution to the welfare of all.

What the Church has learned from this understanding of the diversity of gifts, is that the ministers or missionaries of God’s word of peace and reconciliation are not primarily the ordained but all baptized persons. The priests and deacons who labor in parishes and institutions are the servants of the laity who labor to bring peace and unity through their many vocations. The bishop and, by extension, the bishop’s staff are in the oft quoted words of Pope Gregory I *servus servorum Dei*, servants of the servants of God, servants of the clergy. And here is where it gets tricky for the Bishop and his staff. We and they are part of a hierarchical institution in which the authority of the bishop is taken seriously. How then shall the servants of the servants of God, the Bishop and his staff, exercise authority if they are lowly servants?

The short answer is “wisely and carefully.” The Latin root of our word “authority” is *auctor* from which we get, the English word “author.” Not surprisingly the Latin dictionary definition of *auctor* is one who brings about existence or promotes prosperity. In Latin *auctor* means creator, maker, father, founder, teacher, supporter, and leader. And the related Latin word *auctoritas*, from which we get the English word “authority” is initially defined as pertaining to invention, production, encouragement, counsel. The other meanings of authority: will, power and influence come at the bottom of the list of definitions. The tricky part, then for the Bishop and his staff is to understand that the nature of the Bishops authority is to support the creation of newness and prosperity among the parishes, institutions, clergy and laity of the diocese. To function as the servants of the servants of God the Bishop and his staff are called to bring counsel, encouragement support, and the challenge of new life to those they serve.

Members of a Bishop’s staff are extensions of the Bishop’s servant ministry. They are his extra hands, feet, voices and ears. But the diocesan staff members are not robots; they have a diversity of gifts for the equipping of the saints. They are men and women like Ted and Robyn who have their

own skills and experiences, their own ways of engaging the Gospel, their own personalities, their own hopes and fears. They know this. The Bishop knows this and so does every other Episcopalian in the diocese.

In the months and years to come the Bishop and his staff will continue to work hard to build trust among themselves. Whether they want it or not, they know that they need to be models of trust for the diocese. To accomplish this they will work at their communication skills, they will debrief their meetings to assure themselves that every persons' ideas have been heard, they will be honest in their disagreements with each other. Left to their own devices I have every reason to believe they will become exemplary models of trust.

But, of course, they will not be left to their own devices. They will be working constantly among the people and parishes of the diocese and that is where the tricky part emerges. I know from experience that in a complicated system like a diocese in which a bishop and several staff persons are all involved simultaneously with different situations and different parishes that communications can become imprecise very quickly. Imprecise communication is the enemy of trust. Some people may attribute different meanings to statements that the bishop or staff members have made. Others may find relationships easier with one staff person than another. A few may try to play one staff person against another. Everywhere there will be the temptation to gossip, or worse to complain to one staff person about the bishop or another staff person. For trust to grow throughout the diocese, everyone involved: the many lay ministers of peace and reconciliation, their servants, the clergy, and the servants of the servants of God must be vigilant and determined to keep communication forever direct, precise and compassionate.

The mission of the Church is to bring the message of unity and reconciliation to those both far off and near who have not yet heard that the kingdom of God is at hand. The mission of the bishop and his staff is so to serve the clergy and laity of this diocese that they can experience the hope and dignity of creating something new and responsive to the pain and estrangement we see around us, thus assisting God to establish peace in His Son. The mission of all baptized members of this diocese is to work and pray together to build a network of trust in which God's grace can prevail, the message of reconciliation can be heard, and the unity of all is clearly revealed in the actions of everyone, laity, clergy, the Bishop and his staff.

