

Renewal of Vows

Cathedral Church of St. Stephen, Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

March 30, 2010

Sermon by Bonnie Anderson, President, House of Deputies

In the Name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are in the midst of holiness as we prepare for these Holy Days, immersed in our communities of faith—worship, bulletins, food preparation, flowers ordered, linens sparkling white, families gathered, people we haven't seen for years show up at church, people we have never seen show up at church. Our senses are on high alert, coming alive.

Even the earth, at least in this hemisphere, is coming alive. The crocuses are up and blooming, the robins are back. How do they get so fat over the winter in those warmer climates? Must be all that southern hospitality.

It is right that on this holy morning, as we recommit ourselves to God, each other and God's work in the world, that we pay particular attention to what we are saying. What exactly are those promises that we make? Making promises is serious business. Especially promises made to God and each other in the context of Christian community. **The promises that we make sustain us. But we are known by the promises we keep.**

Always we can gather strength from our baptismal promises. Always. Always we turn to God and to our communities of faith and to the relationships we hold close. We turn to those we are commanded to love, we turn to one another, and we remind each other of our many gifts. We remind each other that we belong to Christ, marked as Christ's own at our baptism. Even with that, there are times when each of us needs support and encouragement and a reminder why we are doing this hard work.

I want to tell you of a friend who did that for me. This is not a story about me, but a story about a person who was a spiritual leader and modeled spiritual leadership for me and many others. This is a story of spiritual leadership.

I knew Jim Kelsey for many years. We served in our respective dioceses as canons to the ordinary – he in Northern Michigan, me in Michigan. We talked on the phone regularly. He was funny and human and spiritual and religious and honest.

Jim was always a layperson. He never forgot that. Even though he was eventually ordained priest and finally ordained and consecrated bishop in the Diocese of Northern Michigan he kept his layperson persona. The church can be seductive, you know. Especially for bishops, I think. We do all sorts of things to set them apart from us, we ask them to dress up in fancy clothes, we prepare elaborate potluck suppers for them. In the words of Jenny Te Paa, “Some of us become ridiculously submissive to bishops.” And then...we complain when they aren’t humble AND prophetic.

Somehow, Jim Kelsey was able to remember that he was a layperson, and he believed deeply in the ministry of all the baptized. He lived his life as a testimony to the ministry of the laos—the whole people of God. At his funeral, his framed baptismal certificate was propped up in front of his casket. Some of us still live by the example he set for us.

He was a true spiritual leader, and true spiritual leadership is the ability to **see** the unique gifts in the holy people of God and **to lift up** other people according to their gifts. The call to spiritual leadership does not belong to any one order of our Church or any one group of people. Spiritual leadership does not belong solely to the clergy or the bishops or even the laity. The essence of true spiritual leadership calls us all into leadership and empowers us all to be the supporting, affirming and powerful community of Christ in the world.

Spiritual leadership is the ministry of all the baptized.

So, how do we do this? How do we exercise our spiritual leadership? We do it together, in relationship. In holy relationship. God’s vision of redemption and reconciliation is not about one

superhero doing it all. All of us have to abandon of the notion that it is solely the job of the clergy and bishops to be the ministers of the Church. That just is not true. The ministers of God's Church are laypersons, bishops, priests and deacons. It says it right on page 855 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. At Church one Sunday morning when I was a newbie Episcopalian, I picked up the *Book of Common Prayer* and started thumbing through it. When I came to page 855 and read the answer to the question "Who are the ministers of the Church?"—when I read the answer for the first time, my heart pounded in my chest and I felt like one of those cartoon characters whose heart is beating so hard that you see it pound in and out through their chest. I knew that I belonged to this Church and that this church belongs to God. The ministers of God's church are the laity, the bishops and the clergy.

The work of spiritual leadership is done together, in relationship. The scriptures are filled with examples of relational models of spiritual leadership. Take Moses, for example. He realizes that God's mission is a communal one. Moses understands that God's mission requires that many people receive and understand and then act upon God's power and authority. With God's help, Moses raises up and blesses seventy elders, equips them and teaches them to raise up more and more people.

And then, of course there is Jesus. Jesus recruits people, helping them identify their gifts and then sends them out to do ministry and to involve more people along the way. Jesus raises up all kinds of people—unlikely people, marginal people, laborers for the harvest—and then sends them out, sometimes even without sandals, to do God's work. "Put down those nets and follow me," he says. And they do.

And you know what else He did? He noticed their gifts, he paid attention to the people around him, and as he lifted up these unlikely lay people for ministry, he convinced them of their power, he told them they could do it, he helped them know the Holy Spirit that lives in them, he showed them to themselves. He showed them their own uniqueness and he showed them how to be ministers – he modeled it for them by his actions. He told them stories and parables that perplexed them and he sent them off figure it out for themselves after he had lived it in their presence.

Jesus was not and is not threatened by the power and authority of the people. Jesus knows where power and authority originates and he knows there is enough power and authority to go around because, just like God's love, God's power and authority is limitless. What inhibits us is the fear—fear that if we share our power, we will somehow be diminished. When in fact, it is quite the opposite. When we share our power with other people of God, we all have more power. Isn't it just like God to fix it up like that?

Unlike the aura of independence that permeates most of the society of the western world, God's mission is a communal one. Not only are we meant to be in relationship, most often, as Henry Nouwen says, we are in Christian community, in relationship “with people we would never choose for ourselves.”

As we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, “the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the Body of Christ.” There is no room in God's vision for the maverick, the lone-ranger.

Our baptism is the most basic sacramental bond we have with each other. For most of us, the seeds sown at our baptism take a while to germinate and flourish. After all, some of us are babies when we are baptized. But we begin the journey of spiritual leadership at our baptism; no matter what our age is, the seed is sown.

I am reminded of author Ann Patchett, who in talking with new college graduates describes it as “a little bit like a garden snake swallowing a chicken egg. It's in you, but it takes a while to digest.” Like the chicken egg swallowed by the snake, spiritual leadership is in us but it takes a while to digest.

So for the laos—the whole people of God, the baptized, who have swallowed the chicken egg, I want to pass along some of my own insights on the ministry of the laity that have advanced the chicken egg a bit for me:

Remember that all the people of God are ministers, equipped with the gifts to do the job.

There are 2 million lay people in the Episcopal Church. Just think what the Episcopal Church

could do if we activated those ministers. Verna Dozier, laywoman, biblical scholar and advocate, called the laity of The Episcopal Church “the sleeping giant.” Twenty years after her prodding, we are beginning to yawn and stretch!

Never sell yourself short. Listen to God, watch for God acting in your life. Believe what you hear God telling you. Take a chance on yourself. **The obstacles in front of you are no match for the power behind you.**

Laity, help the clergy, and vice versa. Clergy, help each other. Clergy can feel as though they are caught in the middle: Accountable to their bishop, accountable to the lay people in their faith community, accountable to their families and loved ones. Some of our clergy in the Episcopal Church are isolated and tired. Some of our clergy are affiliated and energetic. Yet competition and pride can often keep clergy from reaching out to each other. Help each other and the laity.

These final two insights for advancing the egg are from my daughter, Devon, an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Minnesota. She and I have talked a lot about spiritual leadership in one form or another for about 30 years.

“In spiritual leadership **expect failure**. We all know the immobilizing effect of fear, our dread of looking stupid and inarticulate, or putting ourselves out there and falling on our faces. Yet embracing failure not only as a part of spiritual leadership but as an *essential ingredient* of it, frees us up to practice it as a process of hits and misses, capable of bouncing back to try again, resolved rather than defeated. Barb Marz tells a story about a blind man begging for money on a bustling downtown street corner holding a scribbled sign that says, “I am blind. Please help.” After weeks of passing the blind man and his empty cup, an advertising executive stops and asks if she can help him. She puts \$10 in his cup, picks up the sign and changes the words. Days later she returns to find the blind man with a full cup. The blind man thanks her and asks what she wrote. And she tells him, “I wrote: Today is the first day of spring and I cannot see it.” Spiritual leadership interprets barriers and failure as invitations and opportunities. The practice of spiritual leadership grows into the knowledge that God can use failure as a tool with which to guide us.

And finally this: to whatever extent possible, **trust the community of faith**. From our holy scripture we know that the heart of God lives in the heart of community. It is within community that we are more effective in ministry, wiser, deeper, more compassionate and honest, more capable than we could ever be as individuals. Spiritual leaders have to work to trust that truth.”

Go forward on behalf of God my friends, in the company of the whole people of God, those present and those who have gone before us. Hold close these words by Marianne Williamson, which I offer to you in the spirit of a blessing:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, Our presence automatically liberates others.

Amen.