

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 10:35-45

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalms 91:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

October 21, 2018

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

I ran across an old chain letter the other day entitled, "The Perfect Pastor." It's a little dated but I thought it was worth sharing with you this morning. It states...

The Perfect Pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes. He condemns sin roundly, but never hurts anyone's feelings. He works from 8am until midnight, and is also the church janitor. The Perfect Pastor makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church. He is 29 years old and has 40 years' worth of experience. Above all, he is handsome.

The Perfect Pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers and he spends most of his time with the senior citizens. He makes 15 home visits a day and is always in his office to be handy when needed. The Perfect Pastor always has time for church meetings and all of its committees, never missing the meeting of any church organization. And he is always busy evangelizing the unchurched.

The Perfect Pastor is always in the next town over! If your pastor does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are tired of their pastor, too. Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the top of your list. If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1, 643 pastors. One of them should be perfect. Have faith in this letter. One church broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months.

What are the flaws in this thinking? If you see no flaws whatsoever, then we need to talk. To be sure, it's a funny parody with a lot of truth behind it. Like when our expectations of any one individual or group gets too far off track. When we lose sight of the fact that church is everyone's responsibility – not just one individual. When we spend too much time critiquing what the church is getting wrong and what it's getting right. It's when we get too focused on asking the church, "What can you do for me?"

And, yes, today kicks off our Stewardship season and this may seem like a strange way to enter into the conversation of giving. But, here is why I like it....This letter, when taken with a degree of humor and humility helps us move from the question – what can you do for me? To the question of how can I serve you?

It's this movement of perspective that Mark and Hebrews highlights for us this morning. And I think these two texts are incredible ways for us to begin stewardship because they help us gain a broader perspective of what it means to cultivate a heart of service to God. A heart that is built upon commitment, conviction, and community. What can I do to serve you, God?

Let's first define stewardship. According to Merriam Webster stewardship is simply the "careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care". And, we all are a part of stewardship. That means when we talk about church stewardship, we are talking about the church which is entrusted to each and every one of us. Not just the Perfect Pastor, not just a few members, and not just the vestry. Church stewardship invites all of you into that process of care and responsibility. Because this is YOUR CHURCH! This is where your commitment, conviction and community come in.

Here's how I want you to think about that.

1) Commitment

The quality of being dedicated. The Gospel of Mark tells the story of James and John. Two overeager disciples that got a little too caught up in their own glory. Sure they were committed to Christ but they became a little too committed to their own success. I would argue that they lost sight of what commitment to Christ really meant. They start by telling Jesus that they want him to do whatever they ask. And what they ask is to sit on Jesus' right and left side. To have greater glory than any of the other disciples. To have a greater sense of power and opportunity.

Jesus, as he so often does, uses this as a teaching moment and turns their request on its head. He says – no gentlemen...true commitment isn't about your own glory or your own success. It's about serving others. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. That's where our commitment, our dedication, must start. Not by seeking a certain end result, not expecting someone else to get the job done, but seeking the simple, on-going, roll up your sleeves, nitty gritty kinds of service that is required to build a more impactful body of Christ. So, the question is...how can you serve God with commitment?

2) Conviction

A firmly held belief. Hebrews points out something we all need to be reminded of. That is that our walk with God is a calling. In context, Hebrews is talking specifically about the role of the priest, the religious leader who is put in charge of guiding others on God's behalf.

But I want to stretch this text a little farther this morning. Because this leadership, this calling to follow Christ in our daily life is something we all have. Yes, it results in different things for different people. We are called forth for different purposes. Some of us will be priests, other choir members, vestry, ushers, or outreach volunteers but we all are called forth as we say each week in our post communion prayer... Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. That's our statement of conviction each week because we believe in the transformative power of our faith. And that conviction calls us to do something with our faith. To be active participants because we believe so strongly in what it means to be followers of Christ. So, our question then becomes, how can I serve you, God, with conviction?

3) Community

A unified body of individuals. I want to go back to Mark for a moment. To James and John. Not to pick on them but besides their misguided commitment, they also forgot their community. They left the rest of the disciples behind in order to get ahead. But, we all know that's not what community is about. Instead, it's about all of us, helping one another, growing together, making sure we each have what we need. And that isn't just those people who call themselves members of Grace. It isn't just the neighbors who we like. It isn't just our own children. Community is how we ensure that everyone has what they need. Community is central to our stewardship. It's central to our understanding of being a committed and convicted member of the body of Christ.

Our baptismal covenant outlines this beautifully when it asks: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? And to those questions, we answer, "I will with God's help." That's community. So I want you to ask...God, how can I serve you in community?

Commitment. Conviction. Community.

Most of you received our stewardship letter by email this week. There is also a hard copy in your stewardship packet in the narthex. As I wrote this year's letter, here is what I was so inspired about...I was inspired that we have together as a committed, convicted community of faith built a strong foundation over the past two years. We have built healthy, sustainable operating processes across the board. We have built a beautiful music ministry. We have added a Community Prayer Service, youth activities and adult formation opportunities. And, of course, we have had so much fun together through fellowship and outreach.

Grace is truly an incredible place. But folks, we are at an important moment where we simply have to grow. I'm not talking about big numbers but I am talking about vibrancy. That means spreading the word to others about this place we love so well – don't be afraid to talk about going to church. Help to bring in new families and friends.

And church growth also means increasing your giving or give for the first time so that we can continue to build upon the foundation we have created together. Financial giving is not always easy to talk about but it's essential for the future of any parish. It is the backbone that sustains us and supports our shared ministry together.

This is our time to be renewed and revitalized. To strengthen our programs and our attendance and our giving. As you consider your gift for the coming year, I ask you to pray about how you can serve God with commitment, conviction and in community. It starts with each of us. Thanks be to God.