

A Call to Mission

Post-Communion Prayer, BCP 365-66

September 10, 2006

I.

I'm sure you have noticed over the last two months that many my sermons have been based on the Gospel reading for the day. Although this is in the Episcopal tradition of lectionary preaching, there is no hard and fast rule. Preachers have discretion to preach on other readings or topics from time to time.

Sometimes we also preach on the Old Testament or New Testament lesson. Sometimes we present a sermon series where a theme is developed over several weeks. Sometimes we give a sermon on a specific topic that is important to the church, such as stewardship, which is a subject we will hear more about in the coming weeks.

Today I am not going to discuss the Gospel, other than to say that if I had preached on it, I would have talked about how, like the deaf man in the Gospel, Jesus also can make us hear God's word and speak God's truth if we but let him. Instead, I will talk about something we say each Sunday from the Book of Common Prayer during our Eucharist services.

And in thinking about the Prayer Book, I could not help but remember the story of the elderly gentleman who had been a mainstream Episcopalian all his life. He faithfully attended services, listened closely to the sermons, and sang the hymns with gusto. However, he had not spent much time actually reading the Bible. When he finally did pick one up and study it seriously, he was amazed to discover how much of the Bible had been lifted directly from the Book of Common Prayer!

II.

Well, that story obviously has the sequence of events just backward. The actual fact is that a great deal of the Book of Common Prayer quotes or is based directly on Scripture. As a result, if a preacher delivers a sermon on material from the Prayer Book, the congregation can take comfort in the fact that they are still hearing a sermon that reflects biblical teaching.

With that background, I ask us to think about part of the Post-Communion prayer we say together after communion is over, and just before we sing the recessional hymn and leave church.

Rite II gives us two choices for a Post-Communion prayer, but they are very similar and I am sure you would recognize both. The first prayer is at page 365 of the Book of Common Prayer, and in it we pray that God will "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."

If we use the other concluding prayer, on the next page of the Prayer Book, we collectively ask God to "send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord."

These are well-known words that carry a comforting sense of acceptance by God. When we say them we have just shared in Christ's presence at the table, and we feel cleansed, uplifted, and renewed. And then we ask God to send us out to serve him in thanksgiving for the spiritual food that we have received.

So, what is the first thing you think about at the end of the service when you hear these sacred words? Do you hear them as I have just described them. Or do they sometimes signal something else?

III.

For me, in earlier days, I often missed the point of the Post-Communion prayer. Instead, these words were like the first robin in springtime. They were like the “click” you hear just before the alarm goes off. These words were a cue that church was about to end, and it soon would be time for coffee and donuts. It was a time of anticipation, but for the wrong reasons.

Perhaps some other people might hear these words in the same way. Perhaps there is almost an instinctive response when the priest says “send us now into the world,” or “send us out to do the work.” Perhaps they might mentally translate those words into “send us out to brunch,” or “send us out to the golf course,” or “send us out to watch the Saints.”

Even now, I sometimes feel a sense of relief at those words. When I hear them I know that the Eucharist is about over, and I have gotten through it without spilling the wine or dropping the wafers. I know that the intense spiritual concentration and focus that is part of serving at the altar is drawing to an end, and I can begin to relax.

And in talking in this way I do not diminish the importance of brunch, golf, or the Saints. God has given us his bounty for our nourishment, he has given us his creation on which we can build golf courses, and there is no doubt that he likes football.

But he also has called us to mission and evangelism. And each week we proclaim, audibly and explicitly, our commitment to go into the world as witnesses to serve God and our neighbors. How seriously do we treat that proclamation? How well do we fulfill that commitment?

There is a danger that these familiar words of the Post-Communion prayer can be said so casually that they lose their meaning. They can become part of the background music of our liturgy, and there is a temptation to let them blend seamlessly into the worship experience.

But that is not how those words were intended. And it certainly is not what they say. When we participate in the Post-Communion prayer we are doing no less than asking God to send us into the world to serve him and bear witness to his truth. That is serious business, it is God’s business, and it is not to be taken lightly.

These are your words, not the preacher’s words. They do not describe what someone else is suggesting that you do, but rather they are words you say to God, in prayer and in community with everyone else around you. And I recognize that as Episcopalians our worship contains prayers that have been written by others. But when we say them, we make them our own.

Listen to the words again. “And now Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.” Or using the other prayer, we say, “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.”

IV.

I believe we have the right instincts here at St. Thomas. We understand the importance of mission, and we certainly demonstrated that in our response to Katrina. And I don’t minimize that work, but it is important to remember that the work we did yesterday and last month and last year is just that—work done yesterday and last month and last year.

We also are called to mission tomorrow, and next week and next year. While we recognize that we already have some missions and ministries underway, I sense that we are called to expand that dimension of the church’s presence in the community

In a way, the call to mission never ends. It is like we are running a race and there is no finish line, at least in this world. The starting blocks are here, and the track is here, and the high hurdles certainly are here, but the finish line is out there obscured in the mists of eternity, in the next world. It is in the nature of the gifts and blessings that God continues to give us that we are called to continue to give back and to help others.

So, you ask, how do we do this? Lofty sentiments are nice, but how do we take the game plan off the blackboard and put it out on the playing field? How do we actually utilize the skills and abilities of people here at St. Thomas to reach out to people and help them know Christ and change their lives? And how do we also reach out to our brothers and sisters in the faith who are suffering or have unfulfilled needs?

How, indeed, do we do this, recognizing that some people have more time than others, and that some people are better equipped to do mission outside the church in the community, while others can best serve God by working inside the church?

There is no specific formula. There is no one size fits all solution. The work of any church in its mission and outreach obviously is linked to the capacities of people in that church. Just as God accepts us as we are, we go out and do God's work as we are.

It is possible, for example, that someone who is retired might have some spare time, while someone else might be overloaded with a huge project at work. Still other people might be spending most of their time taking care of kids. And next year that could all change. Things could be entirely different later, and we should recognize that.

But we also should recognize that when we sincerely ask God to send us out, he will not leave us on our own. He will enable us and empower us, and through the Holy Spirit he will lead us to do the work he wants us to do.

So, here is the plan. Here at St. Thomas we are going to resist the temptation to try to take an inventory of the skills and talents and abilities and interests that you all have, and then create a mission and outreach program based on the results. I have seen churches try that with uneven success. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it does not.

As a result, we are going to come at it from the other direction. We, as the church, are going to set forth suggestions for missions and ministries and projects and ideas that we think merit attention by people here at St. Thomas. You all then would have the opportunity to pray about it and discern where, how, and under what circumstances the words of the Post-Communion prayer might become manifest in your lives.

In summary, rather than asking you all to tell us what you can do, and then trying to point you in the right direction, we are going to set forth the opportunities for service, mission and ministry for which there appears to be a need, and let you prayerfully decide where the Holy Spirit might be calling you to act.

This will happen in two weeks, on September 24, which will be Mission Sunday at St. Thomas. There will be no special program or activities that day. The principal difference will be that your service bulletin will be a little thicker than usual because it will contain an appendix; a supplement, that specifically sets forth these possible areas for service and witness.

And this document will not be the end result but rather a point of departure. It probably will be changed and updated over time. Hopefully, it will connect with some of you in ways that respond to your existing interests. For others, it might stimulate interest in an entirely new area. And for still others, it just might be food for thought.

In any event, however, I believe we are called to expand our outreach and our mission, and this is one way to start.

v.

In about fifteen to twenty minutes we once again will say the words that set this sermon into motion. We will ask God to send us out to serve him; to do his work in the world.

I pray that these words we say together as a community can be more than just a signal that the service is about over. I pray that they also can be a heartfelt invitation to the Holy Spirit to come upon us and lead us in the way of mission and service. *Amen.*