

"All that we Need is Here"  
Sermon by The Rev. Frank P. Toia, M. Div.  
On the Sunday Before the Beginning of the New Rector,  
The Rev. Emily Barr Richards,  
At St. Peter's Church, Glenside, PA  
Proper 6B – June 14, 2009

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Jesus said, "The kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

*Lord, open our hearts and our minds and our hands that we may love you and know you and serve you as you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

It's a nice coincidence (if you believe in coincidences) that, on this last Sunday of our long period of preparation for our new Rector, the scripture passages appointed for today are filled with images of trees. There's the mustard tree of the Gospel that is depicted on your leaflet and in the Story Window back there. And there's the cedar tree that Ezekiel says the Lord will plant as a tender twig "on a high and lofty mountain... in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit..." And the psalmist tells us that "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon."

So, as we look toward the next chapter in the life of St. Peter's, we are given a reminder of who we are and what our mission is: ***"Rooted in love, growing through God's grace, reaching out to all."***

In a sermon back in September of 2007, just as we were beginning this interim journey together, I quoted some lines from a poem by Wendell Berry:

What we need is here.  
And we pray not for a new heaven and earth  
But to be quiet in heart; and in eye, clear.  
And we pray not for a new heaven and earth  
But to be quiet in heart; and in eye, clear.  
What we need is here.

I went on to say that I thought that there was a message in these lines for St. Peter's Church and our shared mission. And I quoted Parker Palmer from whom I first heard these lines from Wendell Barry:

What we need is here. First of all in this very room is the "precious inwardness" of every human being... in this place. The soul, the spirit, the heart, "that of God in every person" – name it what you will. The Hasidim call it "the divine spark", Thomas Merton calls it "the true self", some folks call it "the higher self", secular humanists call it "identity and integrity". Nobody knows its true name. It's the *being* in human being.

It's the mystery of the power we bear as beings created in the Image of God. And each of us has it. We may be out of touch with it; we may lose contact. But it's there. What we need is here and it's inside each of us.

[Then Parker goes on to say,] The second thing that's here that we need is what's between us. Not only what's within us but what's between us. And what's between us is the potentiality to come together in communities that know how to invite and welcome and indeed evoke – to draw out of each person that soul place, that identity and integrity, that heart, that spark of the divine, that capacity to *be* what we were created to be in the world.

I thought that it was important to remind ourselves, before our interim rector arrived, that everything we needed was already here, that the role of the interim rector (and now I can say, the role of our new rector) is not to bring us something that we lack but to evoke and enable and empower what is already here within us and among us, in our hearts and in our parish community. What we need is here.

And, if I do say so myself, my words turned out to be prophetic. Even though the first few months were pretty rocky and the whole interim period has had its challenges, the people of St. Peter's have done a remarkable job both of continuing the life and ministry of the parish and of discerning God's will for the next rector. What we needed was already here.

In his sermon on April 19<sup>th</sup>, Bob Hartung, Chair of the Discernment Committee, said,

"The process ... has been one of mutual discernment. We tried to discern God's will for St. Peter's while, at the same time, and this is the miracle, there was someone on a journey of discernment leading her to St. Peter's!!! [He went on to say:] When our consultant, The Reverend Barry Miller, met with us in July, someone asked, 'How will we know we made the right decision?' He simply said, 'If you do it right, you'll know'. If you do it right, you'll know... today, we have seen and we believe! Quoting a passage from the Book of Acts, Bob said: 'Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul....' And then he added, "I believe a miracle happened at 654 N. Easton Road that day."

I agree! I mean, when you get two dozen Episcopalians to agree on ANYthing it must be the work of the Spirit!

So the discernment committee has done its job, or, more accurately, the discernment committee has provided the vehicle by which the Holy Spirit could do her job. And tomorrow The Rev. Emily Barr Richards will begin her ministry among us as friend and rector.

But again I need to say, "Everything we need is here." Not up there in the rectory or wherever Emily is right now, but here within us and among us, in the people of God in this place. I truly believe that Emily is called to be the Rector of St. Peter's. She is not called to bring us something that we lack. Oh, she'll bring her gifts, of course, just as each of us is called to bring our gifts. And I believe that Emily has many rich gifts to offer. But her role is

not to supply what we lack; it's to evoke and enable and empower what is already here within us and among us, in our hearts and in our parish community.

I believe that we know that in our hearts. We have not put ministry on hold during this in-between time. We have resisted the temptation to say, "Let's wait until the new rector comes before we decide this or start that. Even now, with the new beginning just days away, the parish continues its mission and ministry. Just three examples:

- A task force was recently created to determine the best ways to respond to the needs of those in our community caught in poverty during this economic downturn.
- Last weekend five additional St. Peter's people attended the "Magnetic Church" conference and they will be getting together with those who have attended previously in order to plan for more effective ways to reach out and welcome new members to the parish.
- On Wednesday representatives of the Spiritual Formation Cluster met to begin shaping next fall's educational and spiritual growth experiences for parishioners of all ages. And the other two clusters, "Service-to-Others" and "Stewardship" will be meeting shortly.

So the life of the parish goes on unabated. Which isn't to say we're not excited about Emily's coming and the rich and deep experiences of God's Spirit that will grow out of her ministry among us. I think we're so excited we could bust!

In many ways it's been an arduous and challenging two years. But I am confident that we will not fall into the trap of breathing a sigh of relief and saying, "Finally we have a new rector, so we can relax". I am sure that the Spirit has new challenges, new opportunities, new work and new joy in store for us in our life together with Emily and Daniel and their daughter, Maggie, and their Jack Russell Terrier, Ellie.

I'll close by coming back to the tree image and sharing with you a story I have quoted before from a book a good Quaker friend gave to Linda and me: The author says:

I was in California a few years ago, and I had never been to California before. I'm from Iowa and I'd never seen the redwood trees other than in picture books. I was amazed at their height, feeling thankful for the redwood trees, and thinking how deep their roots must grow to hold up a tree so tall. And in meeting for worship that very day, a Friend rose and said something like, "You know these redwood trees? You'd think their roots go really deep, but their roots also go out really wide. They spread out to each other and entangle with each other, and give each other support and that's how they stand and grow so tall, and that's how they weather storms."

That's what community is about! We want our own spiritual roots to go deep, but as they grow deep, they can also be growing out and intertwining with others, supporting each other against the wind and the rain and the storms in the Spirit.

"Rooted in love, growing through God's grace, reaching out to all."