

Epiphany 2C

The Rev. Emily Richards

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*We're All In This Together*

I sometimes feel like I have a love, hate relationship with the lectionary. There are times I do struggle with the texts, feel constrained by them and wish I could throw them out and simply choose other passages I'd like to preach on. And then there are those occasions when I am amazed at how the selected texts are exactly the ones which need to be heard and proclaimed. I am again reminded that the Holy Spirit is at work in these lectionary selections. Today's lesson from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a perfect case in point.

I needed to hear his words this week and I believe so did all of you. Paul is writing to a church, experiencing challenging times in their life together. The Corinthian congregation is comprised of a very diverse group of people: Jewish Christians and Greek Christians, slaves and free, rich and poor, women and men. Out of this diversity arose factions. There are also divisions between those who emphasize speaking in tongues and those who emphasize speaking about Christ, and between followers loyal to the teachings of Paul or Peter or Apollos. Paul is writing in response to the Corinthians' question, "What are we to do with all these differences and divisions in the church?" Throughout chapters 12-14 Paul personally and passionately addresses this concern. In the particular passage for today, Paul responds in this way: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of

them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

“All of this discernment, all of these gifts, services, and activities are activated by God for a purpose,” writes Karen Stokes. “Each person, Paul says, is given a manifestation of the Spirit to be used for the common good. Paul’s words offer a refreshing, even shocking reminder that faith, while personal is never private, and that the gift each person has been given is meant to be shared.” Our lives of faith are meant to be lived together. Our gifts are meant to be shared with one another. And our unity is derived from working together, utilizing our unique, individual gifts given to us by the same Spirit to further Christ’s mission and ministry in our world.

As a parish we are facing challenging times. We find ourselves in a new period of transition in our life together. For some of us this seems scary or confusing. For others of us we are eager and ready to embrace the challenges. And for yet others we are weary of all the changes that over the past two and half years have been taking place in our community. However, I hope that we can all see this as an opportunity, an opportunity to live more fully into the image of the Church that Paul gives us. This is an occasion, friends, when we all need to step up and share our gifts with our parish family. What I said to you back in the fall in my stewardship sermon, I say to you again: we have much work to do. It is both joyful and challenging work. I need your help. Your vestry needs your help. I need every single one of you to give of your time and talent and resources, to step out in faith with me and your vestry and claim God’s promises for our parish. I continue to believe wholeheartedly that we can balance our budget. I believe that we can build on our on-going mission and create a bold vision for our future. We can do it together. We can do it with God’s help.

As I was preparing for this sermon a memory of an early experience in seminary came flooding back. It was a Friday morning, only six weeks into my first semester of seminary. My classmates and I were sitting in a lecture on the book of Exodus given by our Old Testament professor when all of a sudden members of the class ahead of us began processing to the front of the room, all decked out in liturgical garb: albs and cassocks and surplices. One led the procession with a cross. Another was swinging incense. Some were dressed up as our professors or members of the seminary staff. And they were all chanting –yes, I know quirky, seminarian humor. For thirty minutes they proceeded to poke fun of our professors, our dean and especially our new, strange lives as theology students. Throughout the performance, they kept repeating the same refrain: “We’re all in this together. We’re all in this together.” As I look back on those years of formation, I can say without a doubt that this refrain taught me as much about ministry in the church as all the lectures I sat in, all the theological books I read, and all the engaging discussions I had with my brilliant professors.

On Wednesday as the tragedy of the Haitian earthquake unfolded, I immediately went on to Facebook and looked up an old, seminary friend who was from Haiti and whose family still lived there. I got to his page and as I began to scroll down I saw more than twenty comments from other concerned seminary friends. “You are in my prayers, friend.” “ My heart aches for you and your people.” “My parishioners and I prayed for your family today in our healing service.” I added similar words and then I thought, “We’re still all in this together.”

Friends, I am more committed to walking this journey with you today than I was in the spring when I first accepted the call to be your rector. In fact the clarity of my call as your rector is stronger now. In my interview with the vestry I remember telling them that a very important part of my priesthood, I believe, is to empower the laity to embrace their own gifts and to share with me in the ministry of the church. My

brothers and sisters, we are all in this together. In the storms and earthquakes, in the joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies, that we share on this journey, may we never stop singing that refrain.