

Sermon for Proper 25C – October 27, 2019
Church of Reconciliation
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes

To Focus on the “Why?”

Good morning, Reconcilers! For three days this past week, I attended the annual clergy conference for the Diocese of West Texas clergy who are actively engaged in parish ministry. There were about 125 or so in attendance and our agenda, if you will, this year, was, in my experience, much more spacious, reflective, prayerful, and deeply personal. We were given opportunities to reflect with brother and sister clergy about our call to priestly ministry. To engage with those at our tables in a deeply honest and vulnerable way that would lead us into each other’s heart and even into our shared struggles and joys. Our own Bishop, David, poignantly modeled such a stance of grace and vulnerability. In a word, it was all a prayer, full of grace and gifts.

Bishop Reed invited the Bishop Diocesan of Northwest Texas (who is also Bishop Provisional of the Diocese of Fort Worth), The Right Rev. Scott Mayer, to share with us during the three days and then to preach at our closing Eucharist during which we reaffirmed our ordination vows.

There is so much I could share with you that brought home to me, the miracle that is a vocation, a call from God to serve God’s beloveds in the church and in the world. I do, however, want to share a powerful story Bishop Scott shared with us. Bishop Scott told of a transgender teen, Grayson, “son of grace”, whom he was to baptize at one visitation in his diocese. He shared how powerful an experience it was for this teen to rename himself at his baptism and take upon himself his deepest and most authentic identity. Bishop Mayer was so moved by the courage of this young man and by the gift of his family to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism within their spiritual family.

Later in the summer when visiting the summer camp of the Diocese of Northwest Texas, Bishop Mayer described the power and beauty of a gathering of teens enjoying the gift of God’s creation. He shared:

And there they were, a beautiful diverse gathering of teenagers having the time of their lives together, Grayson among them, African-American teens, straight, gay and lesbian teens, ... a rainbow diversity of God's beloved children playing, celebrating, and reveling not only in the beauty of Creation but also in the Beauty of their divinely created beings. And then he paused as he recollected himself and said, "I was overcome with pride and hope for the Church, for that could not have happened in Northwest Texas not so long ago."

Bishop Mayer went on to challenge each of us there, as I extend this challenge to each of you now, to focus on the "why" it is we do what we do. On the "why" that sustains each of our vocations. On the "why" of our faith in Jesus Christ. If we focus on the "why", he said, then we begin at the very center, the very heart of our call, and move out from there, deeply anchored from the Source, the Center, the Divine who has called us each by name. Only then will we be driven by a purpose beyond ourselves.

He reminded us of the power of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, saying MLK's was an "I have a DREAM" speech; not an "I have a PLAN" speech. It is not the "what" or even the "how" of our vocations that anchors us in God's grace, hope, mercy, forgiveness, strength, peace and love, it is the "why." The "why" of Jesus Christ himself who was willing to lose, to lose everything, to sacrifice everything as he did, for the life of all God's beloveds. Such an orientation toward one's vocation roots each person in God's immeasurable love. The Love that binds us to Jesus Christ, the Love that asks if we are truly willing to be like the One we receive, to truly *be like Jesus?*

"Voices in the world wonder if we, the Church, the Body of Christ, have in itself, the capacity to win?" To which he responded that this is the wrong question. The better question is: "Like Jesus, do we have enough faith to lose alongside those whom we are called to serve, to lose, to sacrifice so as to rise with Christ?"

My friends in Christ, do we have enough faith to lose, to give not out of our surplus but to give out of our very substance?

These questions are at the very heart of the biblical texts we have before us this day.

The Book of Sirach, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira, was written in Hebrew about 200 BCE, right in the heart of the Second Temple period. At a time when Hellenization had firmly gripped the ancient Mediterranean world, and presented Judaism with an existential threat, Sirach interprets his traditions to show their profundity and their practicality. The book engages Israel's past and offers a theological formulation of how to live and how to think about God.

The very first verse of this text succinctly summarizes the keeping of the Law as the guarantor of God's blessing:

Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford.

For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold.

It is God alone who is the Giver of every good gift and every blessing. And it is, according to Sirach, the responsibility of one who obeys the Law, to give as generously as possible in return for such blessings in their own life.

I hope you are reading, praying, and reflecting on the meditations in the little book you received as a gift from Reconciliation, "Practicing Extravagant Generosity." In each of the brief reflections there is a story and a challenge to how we are called into being extravagant givers. As in Bishop Mayer's reflections, if we focus on the "why" of our vocations that inextricably connects us to the Source of that call, then we will withhold **nothing** of who we are, what we have, or how we will live. Only then, we will live in such a way that reorients us from "winning" to losing ... from dying to rising with Christ.

Today, our gospel text brings home that very same lesson. At first glance, what seems to happen in this parable is only superficial. There is a lot going on here. For sure there are differences between the Pharisee and the tax collector in terms of how they stand, what they pray for, and how they pray. I believe that if a sermon on this gospel text only focuses on how terrible the Pharisee was in comparison to the tax collector, then the preacher has missed the message as the

characters in this parable are each caricatures- a caricature of a Pharisee and a caricature of a sinner.

The message of this parable demands that we reflect on the humble contrition that God desires versus the arrogance that poisons a life of faith and service. All kinds of people- whether publicans, Pharisees, pastors, parishioners, politicians or perpetrators are capable of either contrition or contempt. Those attitudes express themselves in how we view our neighbors, ourselves, and even more importantly on how we view our relationship with God.

Which brings me back to Bishop Mayer's challenging reflections at clergy conference:

The "why" of our vocation, which is the primary place out of which we live out our faith is finally connected to how and what:

How shall we pray to a wildly merciful God?

How shall we live, having learned of such boundless mercy?

How is God calling us to extravagant generosity in our lives?

What are we willing to lose in order to live like Jesus?

These are the questions you and I must ask in every season and circumstance of our life of faith in Jesus Christ. I commend them to you... place them on your heart and pray without ceasing. Amen.