

## HIGH CALLING

### Year A, Pentecost 12 – Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

It seems to me that of all the banners our national church has raised over the years, “In Mission for Others” is the one that has both inspired and offended Canadian Lutherans the most. When our national bishop, Susan Johnson, first took office almost seven years ago, there was speculation that a new slogan would be created to coincide with the beginning of her episcopacy. Susan resisted, observing that “In Mission for Others” still had traction in the synods and congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada because it served as a corrective for the institutional default of being “in mission for ourselves”. It is so easy, she observed, to forget the outward call of the gospel and look after our own needs first: a church “in mission for others” is constantly reminded by that phrase that others’ needs are our focus, that our mission field is broad, that the church must *be* good news for our communities, our country, and our world.

I love the little exchange that takes place in today’s Gospel between Jesus and Peter. If you were in church last week, you would have heard Part One of this Gospel, the one occasion we have in the gospels when Peter is fairly brilliant. Jesus, it seems, wonders if any of his disciples really understand the full extent of their ministry together, and Peter in a flash of divine inspiration famously says to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Jesus is amazed: one of the Twelve actually gets it, actually understands why everything they are doing together is so important! He cannot help himself: in a blink, Jesus commends Peter for his insight and begins, we surmise, to hope that something will come of all his healing, teaching, and preaching; that Peter may be the one to take the ball and run with it; that Peter just might be Jesus’ succession plan.

And then, there is Part Two, today’s Gospel, in which Peter drops the ball Jesus passed him, pretty much on Jesus’ feet. Matthew tells us that Jesus provided his disciples with a preview of what lies ahead of them: that Jesus must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and then be raised on the third day. Rather than using the lights he turned on a few minutes earlier to examine the significance of the liturgy Jesus describes, Peter, it seems, has turned out the lights and is ready to go home. “Surely you can get out of this?” he says to Jesus; “we don’t have to go to Jerusalem.” And then Jesus gets really ticked: if ever you doubted his full humanity, here it is in plain view. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” A few moments earlier, Peter had a toe-hold on God’s plan of salvation in Jesus the Christ, a plan most likely revealed to Peter through Jesus’ own proclamation in word and action; and now, it’s as if Peter’s glimpse into the mind of God had never happened; it’s back to business as usual with the disciples, Peter included, several steps behind Jesus.

Perhaps what we see happening in these two scenes, Part One and Part Two, is a metaphor for what happens to us as the church. We can be “In Mission for Others” one moment, and be “in mission for ourselves” the next. It’s not such a leap when you think about it – especially when we look at the challenge factor presented by the gospel and the course of least resistance that we typically dub ‘human nature’.

Saint Paul offers a clear vision of the high call of the gospel in this morning’s reading from Romans – and as we read through his list, we can almost feel in our gut the tug of human nature. Paul instructs his congregation, “Love without conditions; rejoice in hope (especially when it is in short supply); be patient in suffering; don’t give up on prayer; bless those who persecute you; live in harmony, using humility as the starting point in your relationships with others; associate with the lowly; do not seek power over others; do not get even or avenge wrongs; give food to your enemies, if they are hungry; give water to your enemies, if they are thirsty.” Paul may well have spent some time reflecting on the teachings of Jesus and then brought to mind the marks of Jesus’ ministry when he composed this list. At one and the same time, it illustrates how to apply the gospel to real-life, everyday situations, and it recognizes the reluctance of human nature to do so.

Love, of course, is what begs our transformation from being a church or a people in mission for ourselves to being a church or a people in mission for others. Love and compassion trump self-interest and self-preservation. Love moved Yahweh to deliver Israel from the oppression they were suffering in Egypt;

love called Jesus to enter Jerusalem and walk the way of the cross; love, the love of Jesus, our love for God and our love of neighbour, is what calls and forms us as a people and a church for others. When we see injustice, love calls us to defend the innocent. When we see oppression, love calls us to stand with those who deserve freedom. When we see people in need of the gifts we have, even the simple gifts of friendship and support, love calls us to share from our abundance.

Our parish was one of the many in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that was not offended by the "In Mission for Others" banner. On the contrary, we were quite inspired by it, and used it to launch a multi-year process of making connections, both within our congregation of members and friends, and then beyond our walls to the community of communities that form our neighbourhood, our city, our region. Listening has become key in the several exercises we have undertaken to match needs with gifts. And love. Sometimes we plan things, such as our community barbecue, as a project we hope might build and strengthen our neighbourhood; sometimes things are thrust upon us, and we respond in love. In a few weeks, I expect our Outreach Committee will ask us to sponsor a refugee, a sponsorship, by the way, that will cost us no money, only time, a generous spirit, and a willingness to risk ourselves in a new relationship of friendship and support.

But let me provide another example of something that was thrust upon us as a congregation, and begged the question concerning the focus of our mission.

It was just before March Break in 2006 that the YWCA gave notice to the families of children in its after-school program here at Christ Church that parents would have to find alternative care for their children after March 31. The YW was embarking on a building program, and part of their due diligence was closing down any lines of business (so to speak) that were losing money. Several YW after-school programs bit the dust that spring. The church asked for a meeting with our YW families to get their support in any intervention we might be able to do. None of the families had a connection with our church, even though we were the church in their community. We wondered about their trust level. But trust, we discovered, was not an issue. The families signalled their comfort with the church's role, and Church Council agreed to use the rent we received from the YW as a bargaining chip in keeping the program running until the end of June. The strategy worked; we gave the program free rent for three months and the YW ran the program to June 30.

During that time, Church Council talked further about taking over the program on a trial basis the following year. We reasoned that it was one way in which we could be "In Mission for Others", and came to consensus on running the program on a break-even basis, and even being prepared to lose a little money on it, if necessary.

The program grew, and with the growth, we were able to keep prices down for the families, keep compensation up for our employees, and generally improve the quality and variety of care and activities each year after our trial year.

Two years ago, Sandowne School offered one-stop shopping (so to speak) for its students: an in-school program that meant children did not need to leave the school campus for either before- or after-school supervision. As a result, our large registration decreased, and Church Council had to renew its commitment to the program, again agreeing that break-even was good enough. We knew that our program was less expensive, and better designed than the in-school programs; that our facilities were more gracious; that families, especially those with limited income, should have a choice of saving money. And Lexington School did not have an in-school program: closing our program would have left the Lexington children and families high and dry. We were pleased to see at the end of the first year that the program was holding its own and continued to do so last year.

But last spring, the Region's school boards announced a change in bell times for both elementary and high school students, effective September 2014. Again, we realized that many of our young families and children would be hard-pressed to accommodate the new hours. And so, we asked our treasurer, Alison Burkett, to do a feasibility study for a before-school program. Alison determined the break-even point for the before-school program, but also considered having the afternoon program subsidize the before-school program, in the short-term. In the early and late summer, our management committee interviewed and hired new staff, and next Tuesday at 7 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon, we launch the new

Lincoln Village *Kids-in-the-Community* Weekday Activities Program. At present, we have approximately 30 children in the after-school program and 10 in the before-school program. We really do need a few more children per day to be able to relax and enjoy the ride, so to speak, but we know about the challenge factor in being “in mission for others”. It’s always there.

What makes a high calling high? My guess is that it relates to what Saint Paul termed “genuine love,” love that does not require its return. Unconditional love. Sacrificial love. Being in mission for others, rather than being in mission for ourselves.

I expect a high calling also has to do with the gospel itself: that if the gifts we have match needs in such a way that those in need of blessing are blessed, we have somehow kept human nature, at least for the moment, in abeyance. And I expect a high calling has much to do with the gospel values of justice, mercy, generosity, and peace. Discipleship, as Peter found, is tricky business. Even when we get it right, we can’t assume we always will. But it is love that calls us, love that forms us, and love that leads us. Sometimes, by the grace of God and usually when we’re not even paying attention, God is glorified. Being “in mission for others” is our high calling.