

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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PARTNERS IN GOD'S SERVICE (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)
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So often, when I read the Bible, I am reminded of the old saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Stories that are thousands of years old often bear painful echoes of things that go on around us, every day.

There is a story, not from the Bible, obviously, that goes something like this. One night, a hotel guest stepped into the hallway to go to the ice machine and accidentally locked himself out of his room. The problem was, he was in his underwear.

Knowing that he had no other choice, the guest went downstairs, across the lobby and up to the front desk. He asked for another key to his room.

The young lady behind the desk looked at him and said, "I'm sorry sir, but before I can give you another key, I need to see some form of identification."¹

That's a story about power (the desk clerk) and powerlessness (the man). Stories about power and the use (or abuse) of power are as common today as they were at the time of Saint Paul, some two thousand years ago.

In today's epistle lesson Paul is writing to a church that he himself had founded. Word has come to him that there is all sorts of mischief going on among this group of young Christians. He has heard that there is a power struggle going on between two factions. One of these factions seems to be swearing allegiance to Paul himself; the other group presumes to follow a man named Apollos.

Paul's argument is quite short and simple: neither Paul nor Apollos is all that important. "We're all servants," he seems to say. "We're all servants of God. That's where the real power is, working together in Christ's name."

Service is not based on the response you get. When Jesus commissioned his disciples he didn't assign them to go just to the nice and appreciative. His only qualifier was that if their ministry was rejected they should "shake it off" and move on. He said nothing about avoiding the nasty in favor of the nice.

Jesus never told his disciples that everyone was nice. He said to love everybody, but he never said everybody was lovable. Later on in the same chapter from Matthew's Gospel that we just heard, Jesus said "Love your enemies." Jesus knew that we would have enemies. He knew people would be rude and unpleasant—he was no romantic. But he expected us to live and serve even the rude and unpleasant people.

When we judge and categorize certain people—good, bad, nice, nasty—we cut them off from the clean fact of their humanity which is a far more complex thing than simply labeling them. We make them "things." They become objects, almost inanimate. This can open a trapdoor for otherwise well-intentioned religious people to end up with "selective service"—selecting to serve only the appreciative.

It's great to serve the grateful; their smiles and thankful eyes warm our hearts. It is

¹Leonard I. Sweet, Vol. 8, No. 2, 25.

less enjoyable to serve the ingrates. But God calls us to serve them as well—sodden drunks eating their dinner out of the dumpster behind Food City; angry homeless and unemployed, jealous of your nice heated home; the critically ill, fearful of dying and angry at God for their condition so they take it out on you when you come to visit. All give little, if anything, to those who try to minister to them, but that doesn't mean that they should be excluded. To do so is to look for avenues of service through stained-glass eyes.

That is all *outside* of the church, though, isn't it? Those are examples of what generally goes by the name of "outreach." Outreach is a very important expression of ministry. One could go so far as to argue that just about everything Jesus did was outreach.

But, I think, we need to apply these same lessons to what goes on inside of the church. The labeling that I talked about is being practiced with a vengeance right now in the Episcopal Church, both at the national level and in many dioceses.

Some of you here may remember the arguments that used to take place over what was called "churchmanship"—whether your parish (or diocese) was "high" church or "low church," anglo-catholic or evangelical.

Today, the labeling goes on in many local congregations that are struggling with a response to the diversity that is so prevalent in our culture. There are parishes struggling to come to grips with the changing economic makeup of their congregation. The Episcopal Church is no longer the church of the Rockefellers, what used to be called the "Republican Party at Prayer." Those days are over friends, and they aren't coming back. We need to shake ourselves off and get on with it.

Right now, in the Diocese of East Tennessee, we have a wonderful opportunity to practice exactly what I'm talking about. We elected yesterday the person who will become the Fourth Bishop of East Tennessee. His name is The Rev. George D. Young, III. Pending consents to his election, he will be consecrated in June.

Bishop vonRosenberg, in his homily at the convention Holy Eucharist, left us with a thought as he gave us what he called the "gift of silence" before we began to vote. He said, "later today we will elect one of the nominees. *But only God can make a bishop.*" To me, that's another way of saying, "I, Paul, planted. Apollos watered, And God gives the growth." We all need to keep that in mind as we move into the future in our diocese. We are all in this together, discerning and following the will of God as revealed to us in Christ Jesus.

We are not all alike. We are like Paul and Apollos—and we are a richer people of God exactly because we are all different. As I read this week in a little daily meditation book that I use: "If we willingly express our thoughts and feelings, we can learn how to resolve our disagreements and to appreciate each other for our differences as well as our similarities. *If two people in a relationship were exactly alike, one of them would be unnecessary.*"²

There is a little chapel in Yorkshire, England, where there is no electricity. At the end of each pew is a candle stand. Each family, when it comes to church, brings its own candle, lights it, and sits under its mellow glow during the service.

If a family is absent from church, its pew goes unlighted, and to that extent the light of the entire church is diminished. As the people come in, light their candles, and take their

²*Touchstones: a Book of Daily Meditations for Men.* Center City: Hazelden, 1991., February 11.

places, the darkness is pushed back. Each family feels that their light is necessary (and it is), and so the members of that little church vie with one another to be faithful in attendance, remembering to bring their candles.

There is a long shadow across our world today which is not going to be dispelled unless we all bring our lights together from far and near and set them to shining together—here in this congregation, in our diocese, in our national church, and in the world. Only then will the darkness recede. Only then will groping people and nations be able to find their way back to God and peace.

God calls us into his service—not bosses, but servants—different, but equal—partners.