

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Welcome Back Sunday
Text: Exodus 32:7-14

Mission Statement

We seek to be instruments of God's peace, bearing witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people—at home, in our local communities and beyond to the wider world.

Vision Statement

As baptized people, we are striving to grow into the full stature of Christ, to become people who more faithfully love and serve both God and our neighbor. Toward that end we are committed to common prayer, life-long Christian formation, hands-on outreach to those in need, and care for one another as we grow in faith.

The process that led to my being called to serve as the fifth rector of this parish began in the fall of 1997. Until that time I'd never heard of Holden, Massachusetts, and wasn't 100% sure how to correctly pronounce "Worcester." But a map confirmed that it was a town just about an hour from Lincoln, where Hathy had grown up and her mom still lives. Hathy had followed me to New Jersey for my last two years of seminary at Drew Theological Seminary and then for an additional year at Princeton Seminary. She had followed me to Connecticut where we lived four years in New Britain—where I was a college chaplain—and then four more years in Westport where I was an Associate Rector. We had moved three times in the first decade of our marriage. In September 1997 our children were seven and three, and we were both eager to find a place we might call "home"—a place to settle down and raise a family. Hathy especially was hoping and praying that what God had in mind for us would be in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—so she could "come home." As that fall unfolded, it began to seem as if Holden might be such a place.

The Episcopal call process is rarely a speedy process, and St. Francis Church has a tendency to be—depending on your perspective either *more* discerning, or *less* decisive than the average parish. So fall turned to winter. Nevertheless, after much prayer it became clear to the Search Committee, the Bishop, and to us that this was the place where God was calling us to live and serve among God's people. We moved into the rectory on February 1, 1998.

One of the great highpoints for me over the course of time that has since unfolded was the fiftieth anniversary celebration of this parish two years ago. The celebration itself on the Feast of St. Francis was wonderful, with my immediate predecessor, our bishop, as the celebrant at Holy Eucharist and his immediate predecessor, the Very Rev. Earl Whepley, preaching. But it was also all that led up to that event that moved me very deeply. That year became an occasion for reflection and prayer. Stories were told that helped us to focus on how we had been in God's hands for fifty years, and for us to begin to ask together: "now what?"

This past year has been a much sadder time for me and for many of you. I tried to express some of my own grief in the notes I wrote for the September "Little Portion," which perhaps some of you read. Since last summer we have buried a number of founding and long-time members of

this parish who were so much a part of our celebrations just two years ago. Like some rock stars for whom a first name alone suffices—people like Bruce and Bono and Madonna for example—so with us there are saints we said goodbye to over the past year for whom a first name is all we need to describe some of what we have lost: Alice, Marjorie, Margaret, Midge, Diran, Bertha. Together they represent something of the passing of a torch, and the call of a new generation.

Of the staff that I inherited in February 1998, only Susan Bastardo remains. In the past year alone we have welcomed a new parish administrator, a new music minister, a new sexton, and a new associate rector—making our youth minister the person with the second longest tenure on the staff. We have begun a parish nurse ministry, and just this month welcomed Jen Delorme as our youth ministry intern. In the midst of so much change, we ask as we begin another fall together: who are we, and where are we heading?

First: who are we? No one sermon dares to try to answer that question completely. But there are some key words and phrases and images that point us in the right direction. As this fall unfolds, our preaching will seek to “unpack” our mission statement and core values, and to offer a more rich answer to that question. As you come in here over the course of the next two months I invite you to come with that question on your hearts.

But I would begin and end by saying that we are first and foremost people who seek to follow Jesus Christ. We know that the Church’s one foundation is not a rector, or a charismatic layperson or staff member or even a liturgy. The church’s one foundation isn’t a program or a staff member—but Jesus Christ her Lord. The church is Christ’s “new creation... by water and the word” and we have been claimed, marked, and sealed as Christ’s own through that sacrament of Holy Baptism, to be co-workers for the Kingdom of God. We renew those promises made at baptism on this day—and once again reiterate our desire to put our whole trust in the love of God made known to us through Jesus.

As this congregation continues to grow we look especially to our children and young people and re-commit ourselves to a vital church school and youth ministry program. Sometimes people say that the children are our future. But I say to you that the children of this parish are our *present*. They are full members of the Body of Christ by virtue of their baptism: and they are engaged with all of us each and every week in prayer and in Christian formation and in mission, and in fellowship. We are all in this together... whether we have been here for years or decades or just minutes and are still trying to figure out what kind of place we have walked into today, that is what binds us together: there is One Lord, and One faith, and One baptism—and we are all one in mission.

This parish is committed to forming a people who follow Jesus Christ in our day to day lives—or as our vision statement puts it: “at home, in our local communities, and beyond to the wider world.” We aren’t here to just get ourselves a little dose of spirituality on the weekends. Our bulletins as you will notice have a new look; but one constant is what it says on the top: that the ministers of this congregation are “all the people.” Each of us has a role to play.

Now that has a nice ring to it. But it really means something that this congregation has come to value over decades. It means the church isn't about Rich Simpson, or about Darrell—or about Pauline—nor even about Midge or Margaret or Lori or Susan or Charles. All of us matter—and each has a role to play as a living member of Christ's Body. But the head, the foundation, the cornerstone is Jesus Christ—our risen Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The average age of the average homeless person in Massachusetts, I heard recently on the radio, is eight. In this society—in this time and place—that is shameful. We can do better. But the Church is called in the meantime to respond to the needs that are before us. Even as we cry out for justice, we are called to respond with compassion. And so in August the Interfaith Hospitality Network came here. Anyone who spent the night here, or cooked meals, or cleaned up, or came to play music, or to play with the kids already knew that the average homeless person is very young by virtue of that experience.

There are public ways to serve, and there are quite behind-the-scenes ways. I saw a young couple come in this summer to paint the nursery. They brought their kids, they emptied the room, they painted it, and they put it back together again. No one asked them to do that: they saw a need, and they responded. Their little girl proudly told me that now the nursery at her church is the same color as her room at home! I saw another kid—a ten-year old and his mother—pulling out weeds out on the front brick walkway during the hot days of July. I saw choir members come in and get together to do an anthem at the funeral of a former choir member—not because they had to and not because the rector or choir director asked them to but because the ministers of this church are all the people and they wanted to be together to make a joyful noise to the Lord and say goodbye to a friend. I saw still others come in and polish the brass and set the table and clean the linens week in and week out, and others who made lemonade and offered hospitality.

So who are we? We are servants of Jesus Christ—and we are in this together. We really are “one in mission”—our varied gifts united by Christ the Lord of all. We don't all do the same things, or even agree to what the priorities should be. But we are all called to share the work and to do our part.

That leads me, then, to that second question: **where are we heading?** What are we up to, exactly, in this parish? The best way I know to respond to that question is to point you to those mission and vision statements. Whatever our talents, we want to be living the St. Francis prayer. We want to respond to the challenges of our day with the same commitment and passion that Francis of Assisi showed in his.

St. Francis heard God calling him by name in that chapel in San Damiano: “Francis: rebuild my church.” I pray that this parish that takes this great saint's name hears that call anew in every generation—in every season of our life together. It is time for us to re-build—time for us to listen for the God who calls each of us by name—time for us to mend and to repair and to build up.

In a world of violence and war and terror, we ask God to make us instruments of peace. Wherever we see hatred—in the world or in the church—we ask God to help us sow seeds of love. Wherever there is injury, or discord, or doubt or despair or darkness—we ask God to show us a way to offer pardon, union, faith, hope, and light.

That is our mission statement as I read it, in a nutshell. Each of us is called to be an “instrument of peace” and in so doing to bear witness to the love of God. That kind of prayer isn’t a one-size fits all. Your way of doing those things will not be the same as mine or perhaps even your closest friend’s. We celebrate that in the Episcopal Church, and in this parish.

Some denominations and some congregations follow what I call the “cookie cutter” approach to spiritual formation. If you read the right book or follow the right steps you, too, can get that same glazed look in your eyes, and everyone will look the same and march to the beat of the same drummer. Now the Body of Christ is a big place, I know. But I for one am very glad that isn’t our approach. We have quiet pray-ers and loud ones. We have action people and contemplatives. We have evangelicals and liberals. We don’t have all the answers but I think we ask the right questions. What binds us together is not our homogeneity, but the grace of God revealed to us in and through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Where does all of this come from? Do we just make it up as we go? Are we just being “politically correct?”—just trying to build a little club here? No. Next weekend my friend and colleague, Darrell Huddleston, can pick up where I left off and talk with us some about “the Anglican Vision.” The vestry is currently reading a book by that same name together. I’ll leave that for next week, but simply want to conclude by saying that as Episcopalians we are rooted in Holy Scripture.

All that I have said—including our focus on Holy Baptism—comes to us from the way that we as Anglicans engage God’s living Word. We don’t see the Bible as a dusty rule book, but as a living, breathing encounter between God and God’s people that is ever new, and ever challenging. It takes on flesh as we encounter it—explore it, wrestle with it, grow with it—one day at a time.

Today’s reading from Exodus gets at that dynamic quality of God’s Word—alive in new ways for every generation. Originally it comes from that time between the slavery of Egypt, and the arrival in the Promised Land. To some extent that is always where you find God’s people—on a journey, in search of the Promised Land. It comes just after the giving of Torah—which you can call “the law” but is more accurately understood as “teaching for life.”

And yet God’s people are a fickle bunch, and never seem to be satisfied. They want certitude rather than trust, they prefer (or at least think they do) golden calves rather than a living God. Why? Perhaps because it is always easier to create God in our own image than it is to be re-fashioned in God’s image. Perhaps because it’s easier to make gods that meet our needs than to follow the God who asks us to be willing to lose our lives in order to find it.

But the lasting truth of this Old Testament reading for me is one every generation must come to again, in new ways. For some it may sound too harsh—and yet for me there is good news and a liberating word in it. This reading from Exodus is a rich and complex text. But for me the key is found in the dialogue—you might even say the argument—that God and Moses are having. It’s an invitation, as I read it, to engage God—to never fear the hard questions, the part of faith that is

found only through prayer. It starts with God telling Moses what the people have been up to. But notice how God refers to this “stiff-necked people”—he says to Moses, “these are *your* people” that have gone and done this. It’s like an angry parent who says to his or her spouse about the child they have been raising together, “do you know what *your* son did?” or “can you believe what *your* daughter has done?” Some people may not like this text because God seems so human; I like it because God seems so human. It isn’t all there is to say about God—it may not be God’s best moment in all of scripture. But it feels real to me; it feels authentic. I can imagine God feels that way sometimes.

But the really interesting part of this text is that it opens the door for Moses and God to have a “heart to heart”—and what is prayer, after all, if it isn’t a “heart-to-heart” with God. Moses responds on behalf of the people—as their intercessor—in ways I am only beginning to grasp after seven years as a rector. Moses implores God to hang in there...to not give up on this people...to remember the promise...to remember Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Moses reminds God that this is “as good as it sometimes gets”—but in the worst of times as in the best of times, these are still *God’s* people—and that has got to be a given, especially in bad times when it may be all that people have to go on. Moses needs to remind God of this fact—of God’s own promise; it becomes a matter of interpretation whether or not God needs that reminder, but the point is Moses needs to do the reminding. That is at least how I read this text this fall: as a priest still learning how to pray, as a rector who is coming to understand that this is not *my* congregation and these are not *my* people. Rather, *we* are all God’s people and that’s enough to go on. In fact, the truth is, it’s more than enough to go on.

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson
September 12, 2004, Holden, Mass.