

Proper 5, Year B

Sermon

June 7, 2015

*“(Because of grace) we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”*

One of the characteristics of the Episcopal Church and other liturgical traditions is that we use a three year lectionary of Bible readings. In other words, every three years, we repeat the same lessons on roughly the same date. For those of us who preach, it can be a challenge and a blessing. On the one hand, we have a roadmap we can follow that guides us to where to go with our sermons. On the other hand, there are times when we say, “Hmmm... those again.” This will come up later this summer when we have five consecutive weeks with a bread theme in the gospels. I can tell you now, I only have two good bread sermons in me. That’s when it helps to have other preachers share the pulpit.

This week is a memorable set of lessons for me and maybe for some of you. I remember the epistle that we heard read today and that I just quoted from at the beginning of the sermon. And I remember what I preached three years ago, too. It is hubris on the part of preachers to think their sermons are remembered. But at least some of them are, by some folks, some of the time (including the preacher!). This one stands out to me because of two people I talked about in the sermon and the challenges they faced with “(their) outer natures wasting away though (their) inner natures were being renewed day by day.”

Both men were dealing with Parkinson’s disease. One is famous—Michael J. Fox; and one is a local hero, well loved by his wife, Liz, family, and those who knew him—Hank Bauer. I won’t re-preach the sermon (though I was tempted to do that), but I will remind us of this part of it—the outward conditions of our lives do not ultimately define us. God has planted a seed in us that is growing right now and that one day will burst through the fragile shell of our earthly

bodies to reveal a redeemed soul that Paul described as “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.”

That seed that God has planted in us, like any seed, needs to be cared for. For though God’s seed is indestructible, it needs proper soil, sunlight, water and nourishment in order to bear fruit. And there is a tendency in life for us to do two things—forget that we have that seed in us that defines us and gives hope for us; and even if we remember that seed is in us, we may neglect the care it requires in order to bear the fruit in our lives that God wants and that will give us eternal joy.

Jesus’ parable of the sower reminds us of what causes us to forget or neglect the seed within each of us and all of us. We get busy, we get distracted, we worry too much about things that don’t matter so much, and ignore things, big things, which really do matter. That can happen to all of us—to good people, smart people, and loving people— even to priests!

That became clear to me this week. My job, my calling, as a parish priest is a wonderful blessing. I love what I do and the people I serve in God’s name; and I am glad that I answered God’s call to be a priest. My weeks are full of a variety of life experiences and I am glad that I can walk and talk with you as you go through this life as Christians and seekers during times of joy and sorrow, questions and convictions.

This week had more depth and variety than the typical week—from a hospice room visit to an update on our construction project; from meeting with Bonnie our new assistant to tubing down a *very* cold river with Meg and several of our youth. And then a day spent in training with some of our parishioners (Lucy Murray and Peggy Bryant) and people from many other churches.

This training was part of the governor’s initiative on re-entry for people leaving prison; and how communities of faith can help there to be healing for those returning citizens and their families and for survivors of crime and their families, too. It was very inspirational. So quite a week! Not all of them are like that, of course; but this one was rich and full and stressful and exciting.

In the midst of this good work and ministry for and with you and on your behalf, I find I can get distracted, too. Yes, even doing “the Lord’s work.” I can worry, I can feel inadequate, I can feel guilty that I (and we) do not do enough

and tired that I (and we) do too much. And those are fine and honest human emotions that none of us are exempt from; in fact, they can even help us if we use them to motivate us to repent and return to the Lord for the grace I (and we) need to be faithful. That is, so we can take care of the seed that God has planted in us.

So what can we do to take care of the God-seed in us and bear fruit that pleases God our Lord; and that satisfies us in this life and the life to come? Some of the basics of my spiritual gardening advice are straightforward: spend time every day in prayer, in stillness before God. Do not make excuses, do not get so caught up in chores and errands and work and TV and the internet and other activities and distractions that we do not reserve time to connect with God, our “gardener” in order to have God help us tend the seed God has planted.

That time of prayer needs to be connected to God’s Word, the Bible, so that we get the nourishment our seed needs to grow. One simple way to do that is to get the weekly email I send out with a link to the coming Sunday’s lessons and some questions to consider; or you can use Forward Day By Day (they have an app for that!) in order to read the Daily Office readings for each day. Pray for five or ten minutes (or more) a day and incorporate Scripture in your prayers. That is eternal gardening 101. Talk with me if you need more instruction.

But that’s not all. Reading the Bible and praying daily are central, but there are two more crucial things that we need to remember so we will grow in the Christian life and follow the example of people like Hank and others we know who show us the way we need follow.

First, if we need help, remember to call out to God and then come to the church to find the help you need. That is part of what we learned from the training this past Thursday. We learned that for prisoners returning to their communities, two things that the church provides—good values and healthy relationships—are the two most important factors by far that decrease recidivism. That is why the governor is wanting to increase the involvement of faith communities—because we can be a unique part of a needed solution in our society. That’s how we can help prisoners. But as one person prayed at the training, “we have all been prisoners of something.”

You see, it is not only returning citizens who need help from faith communities; all of us need help from time to time. The church cannot solve all of our problems when we are in need. But the people of the church can help us remember what is important—our values, that is how we think about life; and also provide healthy, life giving relationships so that we do not face our challenges alone.

So in order for us to grow, we need to be willing to come to church, ask for help, and then stay in relationship with God through the church. That way the seed God has planted in us has a chance to grow and bear fruit so we can bless God, bless our common life, and bless the lives of those around us.

And that leads to the second thing—not only do we need to ask for and be willing to accept the church’s help when we need it; we need to have an awareness and a willingness to be people of faith who help others. Church at our core is about receiving and sharing God’s love and forgiveness given to us in Jesus; and doing that in an attitude of thanks and praise. That’s it. So when we gather on a Sunday, when we meet during the week, when we go someplace like a mission trip or visiting people in a prison or a hospital, that is why we do what we do—to acknowledge God’s generous love and to share it so that we receive what we need to bear fruit.

Depending where we are today, we may feel distracted. Life may be hard for us—grieving the loss of a loved one, whether to death, addiction, or prison; or being afraid because life seems out of control; or perhaps we are simply working too hard so that we lose track of why we are working. Or we may be distracted in other ways—with a good life and wonderful kids and so many blessings; and yet still feel an emptiness that comes from neglecting God’s seed that is within us.

No matter where we are today, I invite us all to take time to recharge our spiritual life through prayer and study of Scripture; and get engaged with the life and ministry of the church—whether to receive the help we need or to do your part to help others. Because those are the things that really matter. Our outer nature is wasting away. But by God’s grace, we can work together and help one another through the afflictions of this life so that we renew our inner nature to “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.” Amen.

