

“Unaccomplished: A Testimony to Grace”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7) – 24 & 25 June 2017

In seminary, twenty-some-odd years ago, everyone had to take two semesters of homiletics, a fancy word for the art of preaching, and they taught us many things, most of which made sense and have proven very helpful, except for one rule: rarely if ever use the words “I” or “me” in a sermon, unless those words are contained in a quotation from the Bible.

The idea behind that rule is that sermons are supposed to deal not with the preacher but with scripture and how it reveals God’s saving love in Jesus Christ, but the problem with that rule is that it excludes the possibility of witness, of offering testimony, of sharing one’s experience of faith with others. To get an “A” in homiletics, I followed that rule, but school’s out, and you are looking at a very naughty boy.

Twenty years ago, on June 21<sup>st</sup>, at Christ Church in Lexington, Bishop Wimberley laid hands on my head, invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit, and declared me a deacon, a word that derives from the Greek as “servant.” Six months and one day later, he performed a similar ceremony and brought me into the priesthood.

Both events were intense, unforgettable, and life-changing, but neither makes me or anyone else inducted into holy orders any better than anyone else, for each one of us received our initial and most important ordination through the waters of Holy Baptism. The primary role of a deacon, a priest, or a bishop is one of humble service designed to help the baptized faithful, live into your ordination, discern God’s call for you, help empower you to answer that call, and bring forth the fruit of ministry.

Conversely, clergy like Rev. Shelley and me need your prayerful guidance and nurturing presence to stay disciplined and faithful, to grow in God's wisdom and grace, to honor the promises and vows we made. If I may speak for both of us, you give us what we need with great generosity. We are blessed to serve as your priests, and no words of mine can express the deep gratitude we feel for your kindness.

Together, we the priests and people of St. Luke's make God's Church stronger, witnessing in word and deed the love that leads to life everlasting, and in the meantime, we strive – in accordance with our Lord's command – for peace with justice and mercy, so that the light of resurrection, the brightness of the Kingdom of God, can shine forth in a world of shadow and confusion.

It isn't always easy, nor is it meant to be. A simple glance at today's lesson from Matthew confirms that. Jesus warned us it would be tough sometimes. To serve as agents of God's purposes, to accept both the high privilege and the fierce responsibility, takes great devotion, the willingness to lose it all to gain what God offers. As Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

But Jesus also promised that God's presence would save us – not from physical suffering or death – but from the temptation to relent, so that we might endure and make a holy sacrifice, a witness to God's power and grace that lifts us and others up so that might we overcome sin – our own and those of others – sin manifest in fear and apathy, rejection and ridicule, and the divisions of our world that too often infect the Church with their malice.

Yet even though there can be a nasty edge to the life of faith, we celebrate how, in ways both small and great, grace claims victory. Those moments are sheer joy, and I believe that each

of us, if we think hard enough, can remember God winning a victory of grace by working through us. But sometimes, it takes keen awareness to notice.

Three year ago, when I departed Virginia, the parish I'd served for over 12 years threw a farewell party for Stephanie, the kids, and me. Eager as I was to come here and be with you, I was an emotional wreck, and then they gave me a big basket full of cards and notes and letters, wishing us well. It took me a long time to start opening those envelopes and much longer to read them all. Many people wrote of moments when God worked through me to bless them, but most of what they mentioned, I could not remember, because it was the simplest acts of service that seemed to meet their needs the most.

When you wonder how God is working through you, when you feel discouraged that your best effort to be faithful seems to yield such paltry results, know that you have changed someone's life for the better because you have welcomed Jesus into your heart and that always brings new life, new hope, both to you and to others. If God someday calls me elsewhere or, preferably, when my time to retire comes, I plan to write each of you a parting letter, reminding you of what you may have forgotten, of how you blessed me in ways you never noticed.

However, there are moments when God's grace bursts forth in amazing and surprising ways, life-altering events that show how God's strength works through us despite our weakness. These are experiences to treasure, for they are precious and rare and drive us onward through the storm.

Very early on in my service as a priest, while at Good Shepherd in Lexington, one of my ministries was to contact every visitor and spend some time with them, if they wanted. It was a big church, about twice the size of St. Luke's, sitting right on East Main Street. So we had a lot of visitors.

It was probably the most frightening and most fulfilling part of my job: frightening because I worried that if I said the wrong thing or gave off the wrong vibe, people might give up on Good Shepherd; fulfilling because getting to know them taught me so much. They probably didn't realize it, but these people courageously searching for a faith family made me a better person and a better priest.

Each encounter was special, because each story was different, but there was this one young woman in her 20's I will never forget. We met at a greasy little diner, and she had brought a legal pad covered with questions. We went through them one by one, and near the end of the meal, she said something along the lines of, "I just don't know if I can come back. I've been away for so long. I feel guilty, unworthy to be there."

So, I asked if she knew about the parable of The Prodigal Son, and to my surprise she didn't. So, I told her the story about the son who wanted his independence so badly that he asked for his inheritance early, before his father died, and how he went away and wasted all that money until he was broke and starving, eating pig slop just to survive. In his desperation, he decided to go home and ask his father to accept him as a slave, a hired hand, because he thought that, after the way he'd behaved, his father couldn't possibly accept him as a son.

When he got close to home, gaunt and dirty with tattered clothes, his father somehow recognized him and ran to him and embraced him. The father started giving orders for a great feast to be prepared. His joy knew no bounds. It was irrepressible, because the son he thought was dead and gone was alive and returned to him.

Then I explained the parable to her something like this. "In the story, the father is God, and you, you are the son who went away, and I am, too, and so is everybody at Good Shepherd and every church there is. From time to time, we all run away from God for one reason or

another, and we feel guilty and unworthy and can't imagine that God would have us back, but then we get so desperate, we decide to take a chance, and we start to pray again or visit a Church or do whatever we think might lead us home. And even while we're still far off, God sees us and accepts us unconditionally, because he's overjoyed that we've come home to him."

And she started crying, which got me started, and there we sat crying together in a booth in a dingy little diner in Lexington. That experience, more than any other – certainly more than being ordained – has been the lodestone my faith for two decades. Two sinners sitting in a diner hoping to find their way home to God.

I walked into that diner with an objective, wanting to accomplish something, namely to keep this young woman worshipping at Good Shepherd, and that she did, but I walked away with the sense that being a priest isn't about accomplishing anything. It's about offering and receiving the gift of faith with everyone you meet, however God leads you to do it, and in that, I am no different from anyone who follows Jesus.

Today, we celebrate a twenty-year anniversary, and I am honored and humbled and excited and grateful, but this remarkable milestone says much more about God's grace and mercy than it does about me. It is an occasion to celebrate thousands of people, including you, who by sharing their faith made mine stronger. It is a day to remember that accomplishment, however we might define it, only comes by getting out of God's way, so that God can have His way, because grace alone creates it all. Amen.