

Epiphany 4, 2012
The Short List—Listen
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

Oh, teach us, Lord, that we may teach / the precious truths
which you impart; / and wing our words, that they may
reach / the hidden depths of many a heart.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Shortly after the beginning of each new year, I set
aside some time to spend with my old, frayed “pastor’s
desk calendar” from the previous year.

There’s something kind of satisfying about its worn
cover and coffee-stained pages, the appointments
scribbled in ink and the events highlighted in color—
reminders of conversations at kitchen tables in winter and
worship services under the locust trees in summer.

A pastor's desk calendar, you may have noticed, is always carried together in the same hand with the Holy Scriptures, parted only at the end of another year—the fullness of time.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, [the calendar wears out] but the word of our God will stand forever.”

With the turning of each page of that calendar, I glance through another window at “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

And a spring of gratitude rises up in my heart as I remember the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus among the people of this household of faith who, as the Letter to the Hebrews encourages, “continually offer a sacrifice of

praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.”

With St. Paul to the Corinthians, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him.”

May God’s grace extend to more and more people to increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

Oh, teach us, Lord, that we may teach / the precious truths which you impart; / and wing our words, that they may reach / the hidden depths of many a heart.

Increasingly I find myself these days standing aside in astonishment, maybe much like those gathered at the

synagogue in Capernaum that sabbath early in Jesus' ministry, those who were "...astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

What I see with them is the Spirit transforming lives for the reign of God and people called into a relationship with their Lord and his body the Church.

I see others following Jesus' example of humble service and growing more deeply into lives of prayer in his name.

I see the gospel and the sacraments, what we call the means of grace, I see these alone creating the Church and giving it growth.

And I, well I stand on the sidelines with those in

Capernaum astonished at the authenticity of Jesus' authority to muzzle the forces opposed to God's will for life—forces which, rather than bless, curse; rather than build up, tear down; rather than encourage, disparage; rather than promote love, sow hate; rather than draw us together, seek to split us apart.

But so much of what I see, from where I stand, isn't the sort of thing that can be recorded in an annual report of a congregation.

Our ministry is not about reports, it's about relationships—with each other and with those in lives.

And many of those relationships you never see—you've never met so many of the people who are related to this congregation. You don't see them every

Sunday.

The rule of heaven, Jesus reminds us, is often hidden from our view, something we can't get our hands on, something to which we can't attach a number.

“The rule of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed... .”

“The rule of heaven is like yeast... .”

“The rule of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ...and the seed would sprout and grow, she doesn't know how.

The rule of God, sprouting and growing among us, is so mysterious that we will never fully understand it.

I wonder if we can allow that.

What I realize again, as I page through my calendar, as I page through the Scriptures, is that the life of the

Church has very little to do with my feeble efforts.

Rather, the life of the Church has everything to do with the power of the Holy Spirit who, across the generations and throughout the ages, communicates the presence our Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel and sacraments.

So, for me, the question of how do we grow a church is not a question to ask.

Paul reminds us, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Most of us today seem to believe that growth has to be visible, measurable, controllable—even when it comes to the mysterious rule of God.

We love to talk about numbers—we’ll do plenty of it later this morning.

How many? ...members, worshipers, kids, students, prayer groups, Bible studies, programs, new members.

How much? ...money.

And if those numbers aren’t what we think they should be, and I’m not sure how we decide what they should be, then we are quick to give somebody a big red “F.”

There has never been a time as a pastor when I have

not had to listen to people drawing comparisons among congregations, bemoaning the state of their poor old church in comparison to some “crystal cathedral” in the distant suburbs

It is almost as though we take some perverse delight in the failure of a church, especially someone else’s failure, rather than having a quiet, confident faith that the rule of God grows in hidden ways, that God even chooses to reside in what we have ruled to be failure.

The church has grown, we think, when there are more people in a given place at a given time than there used to be at that given place and given time.

But I just don’t see Jesus counting.

And I don’t see him comparing one disciple to another.

And I don't hear Paul saying that one member of the body is more significant than another member just because the one is bigger than the other.

But we like big.

Tell me, how do you measure faith?

How do you measure hope?

How do you measure love?

How do measure compassion?

How do you measure joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity?

Aren't these are the fruits that our faith is called to bear?

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

What I hope to witness especially at this time of year

is that our ministry together in Jesus' name is becoming like that of John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus and said, "He must increase, but I must decrease. The one who comes from above is above all... ."

"He must increase, but I must decrease."

Oh, teach us, Lord, that we may teach / the precious truths which you impart; / and wing our words, that they may reach / the hidden depths of many a heart.

Note that the first thing that Jesus does in Mark's Gospel is that he comes to a synagogue in Capernaum and he teaches, "And his teaching 'blew their minds,' for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

So, people listen to Jesus.

His authority is authentic.

Not only do people listen to Jesus, but the unclean spirits listen to him, too.

Jesus rebukes an unclean spirit, commanding it to “Be silent [literally, be muzzled], and come out of him!”

Not only do people and unclean spirits listen to Jesus, even the stormy sea listens to him when he speaks to it exactly in the same way as the unclean spirit: “He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Be still! Be muzzled!’ ...The wind ceased, and there was a dead calm... And they feared a great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’ ”

Jesus’ authority is authentic.

He is a true prophet who does what he says.

And everybody, even the unclean spirits, convulsing both people and the deep blue sea, everybody recognizes that this is a new kind of authority, a new kind of authority by which the unclean and deprived are seen and heard, healed and restored.

Oh, teach us, Lord, that we may teach / the precious truths which you impart; / and wing our words, that they may reach / the hidden depths of many a heart.

To have authority, to author something, is to create, to cause an increase, to give growth.

So, Peter calls Jesus the "...Author of life, whom God raised from the dead."

Jesus is the author.

He teaches with authority.

He causes the increase, probably in ways beyond our ways of counting.

And everybody listens.

I cannot remember an annual meeting anywhere when I did not stand before a congregation with a long list of ideas to be considered, projects to do for the coming year, activities that I thought should be undertaken so that we might grow the church.

No, so that I might grow the church.

This year, in the wake of Jonah's very short but effective sermon a week ago, I come to you with a very short but effective list for you to consider.

In fact, there is only one word on my list—listen.

That's my list—listen.

“Be still. Be muzzled. Listen.”

Listen to Jesus who teaches with authority, and let him
to be the author of our life together.

I'm asking you to do the most difficult thing there is to
do in your life.

Listening in a world like ours is practically impossible,
especially listening to an authority which is greater than
ourselves and the spirits that occupy us.

But if we are to listen, we will have to be still.

The unclean spirits that occupy and oppose, that
inhabit and inhibit, must be silenced when Jesus speaks.

Be still. Listen.

Listen to the words of the liturgy that have sustained generations of the faithful throughout the ages. You've said and sung them many times, but maybe you've never really listened to the words.

Listen to the rich texts and melodies of the hymns that we sing which address the full range of human experience and emotions.

Listen to the Scriptures as you hear these sacred writings read in worship and as you meditate daily on a passage or two.

Listen Jesus' words, "Given and shed FOR YOU."

Listen more than you speak when you enter times of prayer, waiting for a voice that is not your own but that of the Spirit who "helps us in our weakness; for we do not

know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Listen to the sermons as best you can, even when you are not really feeling like it, even when they do not speak directly to you; sometimes they are for others.

Listen with others when we meet in smaller groups to read, study and converse about the Bible and matters of faith and life.

Listen to those in the fellowship, in our communities, and in your daily lives as we seek meaning in a very complicated, confusing, and oftentimes lonesome world.

Listen for the prompting of the Spirit, inviting you to rest, to breath, to be quiet, to be empty.

Listen to the hearts that surround you crying “Abba

Father,' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit
that we are children of God.”

Be still. Listen.

That's my list.

“[And] let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... and
with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and
spiritual songs to God.”

Oh, teach us, Lord, that we may teach / the precious truths
which you impart; / and wing our words, that they may
reach / the hidden depths of many a heart.