

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
October 25, 2009
21st Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 25)**

Job 42:1-6, 10-17
Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

Bill Furry and I went to the diocesan convention in Plymouth yesterday. The theme of the convention was mission, and the chaplain for the convention was Bishop Todd McGregor from Madagascar. He talked about the Great Commission where Jesus told the disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Bishop McGregor talked about the verbs and how that in the Greek one was primary and the others depended on it. I am not a Greek scholar, so when he asked for a show of hands to see which one of the verbs was the most important, I looked for someone smarter than I was sitting in front of me and voted with him.

It turns out that the most important verb in the Great Commission is “make disciples.” Bishop McGregor and his wife are people who take this directive seriously. In the three years since he was consecrated bishop, he has started 35 churches and a school to train evangelists and clergy. He has baptized over 1300 people into the Body of Christ. I stand in awe.

It is not just in Madagascar that people are making disciples. In this diocese, Fr. Schramm in Plymouth has an active Hispanic ministry, and St. Thomas is supporting a missionary in the Honduras. Fr. Henry in Elkhart is the Vocations Director, and there are ten people in process in this diocese. This is near and dear to us at St. Elizabeth's because I am one of those ten.

I am going to predict some changes in the diocese that will look back to this convention as a starting point. There was a resolution that came from a South Bend deanery meeting I was part of, and it was amended by our own Sr. Warden-elect, Bill Furry. This resolution forms a task force to examine the model for ministry in this diocese, and I think there is a sense that the parish model is not working well. There are too many parishes that can't support a fulltime priest.

St. Elizabeth's has survived for years with part-time clergy, and we pay our diocesan assessment, but others are struggling to make ends meet more than we are. A number of churches can't afford a fulltime priest especially given the increased cost of health insurance and housing. There are several parishes that have had to ask for a reduction in assessment this year, and it may be time to move from a parish priest model.

Some of you may have read Jeff Kenney's article in the Culver Citizen about yoked parishes, and this is one possible solution. My father had three churches in Maine and either three or four services on a Sunday when we were there in the late 60's and early 70's. Another possibility is the model they used in Uganda, and I talked to Fr. Tad at St. Mary's about this. They had a hub with satellite parishes. A team of priests at the hub would travel to the satellite parishes to celebrate Holy Communion, and so a group of ten churches might have three priests that they shared.

All of you are familiar with the Methodist preacher riding a circuit, and my great grandfather had a ministry of this sort in Tennessee at one point. There are bi-vocational priests like St. Paul the tentmaker. He had a day job and work allowed him to preach the Gospel in his free time. I predict that we will see more and more of this sort of thing in the next ten years, and this task force will look at some of the things that other dioceses are doing. Fewer parishes will have a dedicated priest just for that parish in ten years if I am reading things correctly.

Fr. Clavier from LaPorte observed that many churches are like the tortoise, and they have their home to carry with them. As a result there is not much flexibility. They are not very mobile, and in the Great Commission we are told to "go." The tortoise does not go anywhere fast.

Mission work in this diocese is taking place with college students, and many of these are from evangelical backgrounds. They are looking for a deeper spiritual experience, and they find a depth and beauty in the liturgy of our tradition. There are grad students attending churches in South Bend. Susan and I had a bunch of them from St. Paul's in Mishawaka over to the house for fried chicken and fixin's last weekend, and there are many students attending Gethsemane in Marion. Several of them have been called to ordained ministry in recent years.

There is also an active ministry taking place with Camp New Happenings at Camp Mack. Through the work of Charlotte Strowhorn in Gary, there is a church camp for children with parents in prison. Twenty seven children attended this camp this year, and this is a group that needs us to share God's love and our gifts.

In today's Scripture we hear the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who calls out to Jesus on the road to Jericho. Jesus stands still and tells the man to come to him. He asks Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus asks to be healed, and Jesus heals him.

I see some important lessons for us in this Scripture. Jesus knew what the man wanted, and stood still. Bartimaeus came to Jesus and asked for what he wanted. We have to be willing to make that step. Jesus is not running from us, but he is also not chasing us down. We have to be willing to come to Jesus, and this requires us to be willing to move. In the words of the Great Commission, we have to "go." By moving, I see a willingness for this congregation to move from Academy Road to State Street. I also mean we have to be willing to move from a comfortable place to one that requires a risk. We have to be willing to move out of a comfort zone.

There are those at St. Thomas who are not completely invested in the Hispanic mission. I think they are being called to this ministry, but that does not mean that everyone wants to get up. There

are those who are not comfortable with the ministry to the children of prisoners. I can go on, but you have examples of your own.

My first question for you is really “What is God calling you to do?”

My second question is “What is God calling us to do?”

Bishop McGregor lives in what I will charitably call a slum. He was willing to get up and find Jesus in Madagascar. This involved more than a little risk, and it required a patient and committed wife.

Once we go to meet Jesus, He asks us “What do you want me to do for you?” We have to know what we want, and we have to be able to ask for it. If we want Jesus to heal us or give compassion for our neighbors, we have to be able to understand that we need healing or compassion.

My next question of course is “What is it that you need to ask Jesus for?” I can’t answer this for you any more than the disciples could answer this for Bartimaeus. He had to take a risk and get up. He had to go, and he had to ask for himself. Jesus knew the man was blind, so it was not a matter of telling Jesus something He did not know. Bartimaeus had to want to be healed, and he had to ask. Jesus healed him.

I want to leave you with the image of the tortoise. I preached a couple of weeks ago about the rich young ruler who was burdened by his stuff. Sometimes I think we are burdened by complacency. We are comfortable where we are, and God is not telling us to stay put and get used to our situation any more than he was telling Bartimaeus to do that.

In the words of the psalm this morning:

“Proclaim with me the greatness of the LORD; *
let us exalt his Name together.”

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen