

Rogation Sunday

May 13, 2007

The Rev. David W. Lovelace

"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted....so begins the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. Rogation Sunday is a reminder to us that God is the Creator of all things and for everything there is a season. Rogation Days were originally days of prayer and fasting observed by the church in the early summer to ask God to protect the newly planted crop and provide a fruitful harvest. The people of the local parish formed a procession walking through the fields and around the boundaries of the parish praying as they went. The word "rogation" comes from the Latin "to ask." They asked God to bless their labors, to provide seasonable weather so they might enjoy the fruits of the earth in due season. The procession ended at the parish church where the congregation celebrated the Eucharist giving thanks to God who provides all that is necessary for life.

For people whose lives were connected to the land, prayers for God's blessing are critical. You and I are very fortunate, year round we can go to Central Market or a grocery store and purchase the food we need. We have lost the sense of urgency attached to Rogation Days.

I have noticed, as Elaine and I have traveled, that people in other parts of the world are more dependant on the land than most Americans. I can recall many a tidy garden around a house to provide vegetables for the household table. Land is valuable and is not wasted planting and watering grass. The land around homes is used to produce that which the family needs. Blessing the land and praying for the crops is critical when your life depends on the food that the family is able to produce for the family table.

St Paul reminds the people of Lystra, "God gave you heavenly rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." In a world that has become increasingly urbanized and technologically more complex, we are further and further removed from the source of our being. Meals are more often than not eaten on the run with no thought for how the food ended up on our plate. We sit alone in our cars waiting for the congestion to clear without any thought for the smog we are helping to create. We turn the water on in our homes and let it run without any concern for decreasing water supplies and the pollution of limited clean water sources.

I was talking to a home builder recently. We were talking about the ability to build environmentally friendly homes. He said it costs about \$5000 more to

build an energy efficient home than the average home he was building in York County. He went on to add, "But who is going to buy it if it costs more? Given the choice between similar homes but one is more environmentally friendly, the buyer will choose the cheaper home." We have lost touch with our connection to the earth, lost touch with our place in the created order and lost touch with our dependency on God for all things.

Rogation Sunday reminds us of the wonder of creation but it also reminds us of the need for careful stewardship. We are reminded of the importance of caring for the good earth on which we live and depend for our very lives. We are reminded that "all things come from God" and we have a responsibility to use these gifts wisely.

As we think about wise use of the gifts bestowed upon us we here at St. John the Baptist are reminded that we are coming to the conclusion of our 2007 - 2008 pledge effort to support the mission of this parish. Next Sunday we are asked to return our pledge card for the period of July, 2007 to June, 2008 as a part of our offering.

Next Sunday our pledge cards will be offered to God on the altar and we'll ask God to bless our gifts so they might be used to produce a fruitful harvest of another kind. The harvest of our shared gifts in service to God, to each other and to the community at large through our parish. Those persons who do not return a pledge card next Sunday can expect a contact from a Stewardship Committee member or a member of the Vestry asking for their support. The Stewardship Committee has communicated this information to us by letter and in weekly bulletin inserts these past few Sundays. They have invited us to consider the importance of our shared mission as the Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist and to each do our part to insure the continued success of our mission statement to grow in spirituality, service and size.

Some months ago I read an article about successful churches. I was curious to know how the experts define a successful church. There were six churches featured all of different denominations and one of another faith tradition. What caught my attention immediately was the fact that all six churches were on the East coast and had played a role in the history of our nation. While we here at St. John have a long proud history I was not convinced reading this article that makes us a successful church.

So, I began to think to myself, what does make a successful church? I want to suggest two things to you that in my opinion do make us a successful church. The first has to do with focus.

Jesus was alone with his disciples when he asked this question, "Who do people say I am?" They answered, "Some say you are a prophet. Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the grave. Some think you are the prophet Elijah." Jesus said, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered for them all, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to Peter, "You are correct, Peter, and on this rock I will build the church."

Much has been made of these words over the years, but the meaning is clear to me. The Church is built on the rock of our faith in God who sent Jesus to come among us to reveal to us the love of God for all created things. This parish derives its greatness from the faith that is handed down from one generation to the next. Faith in Jesus as the Christ, the revelation of our loving God. The greatness of the church is in the God of the church.

The second mark of greatness is that the parish is dedicated to service. As a parish we have committed ourselves to be aware of and respond to the needs of parish members and members of the larger community. A great church is a church that cares enough to serve.

In the past year there have been many among us who have suffered because of illness or loss. I can tell you of countless times when members of this parish sacrificed themselves, their time and energy to respond to a parishioner in need. When parishioners are in the hospital or a nursing facility members of this parish visit and offer to assist families to meet the needs of every day life. Through a variety of means this parish responds to be sure that all who are part of the parish are cared for and cared about in the most generous possible ways.

Beyond the parish we continue to provide excellent, affordable low income housing to three of our neighbors. We provide a safe place for members of the community to learn English as a second language or complete their GED. As a parish we provide the place for members of the community to find support to overcome addiction and make life changing decisions about their approach to life. We support development work in the diocese and in remote places of the world. This summer we shall send the third group of St. John's parishioners on a "mission trip" to help others overcome their hardships. A great church is one that cares enough to serve.

Many years ago an evangelist held a revival at Soldiers Field in Chicago. He preached a powerful sermon on commitment to Jesus and what that meant for a person of faith. At the conclusion he asked that the great light towers be turned off. The crowd of people was thrust into darkness. Then he invited everyone to light a match. Slowly little flickering lights began to emerge until the stadium was bathed in light. His point was made.

This parish is one great light in the York community because of all our small lights. I know this is a parish where people hold fast and live out their faith in Jesus Christ. I know this is a parish where people care enough to serve. I pray that we never lose sight of our place in this wonderful creation of God. That we remember always that all things come from God and our responsibility is to be good stewards. As good stewards, I am confident that next Sunday I shall have the privilege of offering to God generous gifts pledging to continue the tradition of this great parish.