

Pentecost 6 Proper 9
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Michael Ireland reporting for an English news service suggests that something new is happening through churches in the United Kingdom. Christians are stepping out in faith. Fresh Expressions is a movement in the Church of England and the Methodist Church throughout the country to reach people currently right outside the church doors. Some Fresh Expressions are aimed at young people and children. Some of the initiatives are for the elderly and housebound, some are directed at families and some have no target group - they are for everyone.

Fresh Expressions of the church meet on different days of the week. Some meet in schools or cafes, some in homes, some at the gym or in a pub. The majority of the initiatives were started by just common Christian folk. These folks simply wanted to offer something meaningful to them and to their lives with the community in which they live and work. They were looking for a fresh expression of their faith and a fresh opportunity to be ambassadors for Christ.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams writes: "We are rediscovering something about what the Church is....the Church is something that happens before it is something that is institutionally organized. It happens when the Good News summons, assembles people around Jesus Christ. The point of Fresh Expressions is the point of the Church itself, to provide a place where Christ is set free in our midst to gather those who want to be in his company. The freedom is always there for our Lord; we can simply try, and as is often said, join in and not get in the way."

If we stop and think about this for a moment, too many things or conditions can get in our way. We all too easily forget the Church is about mission not self preservation of an institution or maintenance of buildings. I have often wondered what stops us from talking about our faith to our friends or our family. Somewhere along the line we have been made to think that "religion is a personal thing." So, like politics, it is forbidden to talk about our faith, that way conversation contains no sticking points over which we may not agree or have our faith challenged. The lessons we just heard read this morning challenge us in a very different way.

Prominent Baptist preacher, the Rev. Dr. Carlyle Marney, used to say that God does not come to church every Sunday. God does not need to because the church belongs to God. Some Sundays God simply sleeps in. But on other Sundays you do find God in church and things are never the same again. Dr. Marney concluded: "You better be in church on Sunday in case God drops in because you don't want to be the one who misses out."

Psalm 66 is about one of those days when God came to church. Here we learn something about God and something about us. Those who are present when God comes to church feel the need to take off their shoes for they know they are in a holy place. The psalmist tells us there are two parts to our encounter with God. The first dimension is corporate and the second personal invitation.

The Psalmist says that when God comes to church we realize that we are part of a great multitude. We are not lost or nameless in this great throng for there is always an individual dimension to our encounter with God. God speaks to all of us through our gathering in community. God also addresses our personal needs in the midst of the community.

No age needs to be reminded more of the corporate nature of the spiritual experience than this day and age. We have a tendency in this "me and my own" age to think we encounter God when God touches our particular need. Most of our praying is like the man who bowed his head and said, "God bless me, my wife, my son and his wife. Just us four. Amen"

The psalmist puts an encounter with God in a larger framework. The whole world is called to acknowledge God and be present with God. "Be joyful in the God, all you lands, sing the glory of God's Name; sing the glory of God's praise." Here we experience communion - that which all of us hold in common. Encountering God connects us to all those throughout the earth who laugh and cry, dream and hope, sing and pray. The circle is drawn so large that "I" becomes "we" and "they" becomes "us." When we encounter God the walls that divide us simply crumble.

Studying the example of Jesus we discover something else about encountering God - we are to invite others to encounter God. In the Gospel this morning Jesus sends out seventy people to go in pairs ahead of him to all the places he intended to visit. According to Luke, these seventy people just go. There is no discussion, no argument, no excuses they just obey.

Their idealism is profound to me. Jesus tells them, "The harvest is plentiful....."

Jesus does not stop there. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals and salute no one on the road." Can you imagine? Leave your credit cards at home, don't worry with packing a suitcase, and don't be stopping to talk to folks along the way. Just go where I am sending you and share the good news that has impacted your life. Jesus does not offer them an 800 number where folks can call in to learn more about this kingdom the seventy are talking about. There is no official letter of introduction, no expense report to fill out, no headquarters to check in with and no way to be connected. Luke records not a whimper or a whine. The seventy take it all in and go to do what was asked of them.

The instructions Jesus gives them are simple. Just go into a village or town and be yourself. Allow God to work through you to touch others. What Jesus tells them is that God will use them to reach other people and to spread the good news of God's kingdom.

In the midst of this idealistic approach to evangelism, Jesus gives them some practical advice. The seventy are not to employ any razzle dazzle pitch to lead people to God, nor Jesus did offer them any magical formula. He said, "Just be yourself. Be open to the hospitality of others. When hospitality is extended to you offer a blessing for the house, 'Peace to this house.'"

Nowhere does Jesus tell them to be concerned about the results of their efforts. Therein lies the realism of God's invitation. Jesus tells the seventy flat out, some will reject your message. There is no 100% success rate when you proclaim the Gospel. When people reject the blessings and goodness you have to share shake the dust off your feet and keep moving. But remind them the kingdom of God has come near.

What does this translate into in our lives? We, Episcopalians, are not known for wearing our faith on our sleeve. The majority of us are not even clear about what we believe so sharing our faith with others does not come easy. We have this idea that as Episcopalians we are supposed to believe a certain way, act a certain way, but the way is not clear. Perhaps that is a good thing. God calls us to just be ourselves. To allow God through the power of the Spirit to work in us and through us to reach others. We can begin by talking

about what is happening in our church and why we feel our participation in the church adds meaning to our lives.

Not only can we talk about our personal involvement but we can share the importance of the ministry we all share together. Did you know that eleven people from our parish have joined forty other Episcopalians from the Lancaster area to work among the people of Mississippi to help those still recovering from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita? Members of our parish as an expression of their faith have taken a leadership role during the past year to assist people in this community to have a better life through a number of different ministering agencies and organizations. Eucharistic visitors assist your clergy by visiting over twenty homebound members or members in nursing homes and thus keep these members connected to the faith community.

The most important ministry of the church is mission. Mission that involves an openness allowing bridges to be built into the world of another. Mission affords people of faith the opportunity to be involved with others, to share that which is most important to us personally and to become vehicles of God's loving grace.

The harvest is plentiful..... Go be yourself. Be an ambassador for Christ.

Amen