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THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



Photo by Iain Merchant

From the Desk of the Vicar-General

By Fr. Michael Penfield

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.” [Matthew 13:24b-25]

We are all familiar with this parable. It is a parable, which may appear simple the first time we read it, but it is actually quite complex. It speaks to heresy and false truths, and how false prophets will follow true prophets. It also speaks of how “similar” the tares and the wheat appear, meaning how heresies and lies appear like the truth. And it also speaks how these false teachings creep in “while men slept,” meaning how these lies creep in when we are apathetic to the Truth.

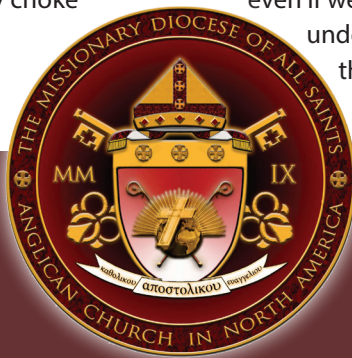
We are also very familiar with the Parable of the Sower, and how some seed fall upon the wayside, some upon stony soil, some with thorns, and some upon good soil. This parable warns us that not all will accept the Word of God, and, even if they do, the cares and troubles of this world may choke their faith out.

But there is one parable that, if I am not mistaken, Jesus never told. It is the parable of

the seven stalks of wheat growing far from the field. I heard one priest who lives in the Deep South in a rural section of the country talk about seeing these stalks growing in the middle of nowhere, and it got me to think. Sometimes we are so concerned with those who do not heed the Word of God, or how the devil is working to destroy the Word, that we do not take a moment to look at God’s successes. And this is especially true in our Convocation of the West.

Many of us have discussed how difficult it is to reach our population. Although my home state ranks second when pollsters ask if God is important to them, only 31% attend church and ranks 35th in the nation in attendance. We bemoan our situation when the truth is that God is working all the time to bring people to His Son, Jesus Christ. We are just too occupied with the failures we perceive exist.

Many of Jesus’ parables deal with agrarian analogies, but even if we were raised in the suburbs, like I was, we can understand that God has a great gift of surprise. And that is the basis of my apocryphal parable of the seven stalks of wheat. When I was in my young



Our Core Value is:

“The Convocation of the West is Missionary, bringing people to Christ and meaningfully engaging in the transformation of the culture around us.”

The Vision of the Convocation is:

*“To STRENGTHEN existing churches;
To PLANT new churches; and
To RAISE UP missional leaders.”*

teens, I was surprised to find wild strawberries growing in my backyard, in an area where my lawnmower could not reach. Likewise recently I have been working in a small garden plot, which was overgrown with ivy. After pulling out much of the ivy, to my surprise, wild primrose started to bloom. God has a wonderful gift of surprising us, and this includes when we evangelize.

When we evangelize, it is impossible to see where our seed will fall. We speak of God and His love, and we hope someone listens. We try to live a good Christian life, and we hope someone observes. We try to be vehicles of light and salt, and we hope someone is illuminated. But we never quite know if that is really happening. Yet, sometimes the seed we sow rolls off the beaten path. Or the seed is carried far away and dropped where no one would expect good soil. And soon the seed sprouts. We may never see it, but it is still there, growing.

In this time of COVID-19 and “shelter in place,” many of us are discouraged. We want to get out; we want to celebrate Holy Eucharist with our community, but we cannot. We want to serve our community but social distancing makes many of the avenues we usually use unavailable. And let’s face it; many of us, like me, are of that age where we are told we are to be extra cautious. And nothing appears quite so unsatisfying as “virtual church.”

But I do not want you to be discouraged. While we are sheltered in place, God is still in the world, working. This virus, as bad as it might be, may be working to bring more to Christ. This time in our homes may bring us out of ourselves. By removing us from our community, it may bring us closer to our

neighbors. And by taking us out of our normal routine, it may actually bring us closer to God.

What I think most Americans, and especially most baby-boomers like myself, do not understand is that evangelism really is not about us, ourselves. We have no power to convert anyone. That is in the hand of God. Whether the seed we sow will be heard and brought to fruition may never be seen by us. It may be years later and miles away from where we originally sowed it. But it may germinate just the same, God willing.

Our job is to sow the seed, plain and simple. We sow the seed every time we speak of Christ. We sow the seed every time we conduct a service “in the beauty of holiness.” We sow the seed every time we love our neighbors as ourselves. We sow the seed every time we are servants to others instead of their masters. And we sow the seed every time we are vehicles of the True Light, instead of perpetuating darkness. We may never know the seed we sow, nor how much germinates, and grows to fruition. That is truly only in God’s hand. But, as God’s servants, that is what we are called to do.

And if we do this, and we continue to do this, maybe God, in His infinite mercy, will surprise us by allowing us to see the fruit of His love. Maybe we can get a glimpse of the person that came to Him as one of those seeds that rolled off the beaten path and found good soil. Maybe we will catch a glimpse of those who are the stalks of golden wheat, ripening where no one suspected seed had been sown. And when we do, we will be justified in exclaiming, “God is good; Thanks be to God!”

Amen.

Following Jesus Through The U-Turns

By Bishop Winfield Mott

Metanoia is a New Testament word usually translated as “repentance.” It literally means to change your mind or your course, to make a U-turn. To do so is urged upon us in a number of places in Scripture, and it is a major theme in Lent. Lent is a pilgrimage of preparation for the celebration of Easter, Pascha, the central event of history. As such, it is a journey inward, to the depths of our soul, to dredge out that which needs to be turned around. There are many places to work on that in the interior of your soul. A neglected focus, though, of needed *metanoia* is exterior instead; how you relate to others.

Recently, the Convocation of the West hosted Canon Mark Eldridge to our annual Clericus in Mesilla, New Mexico. He raised a question in his presentation that I am still pondering: Jesus mandates us to do mission, so how do we

follow Jesus in doing that?

Jesus began his specific ministry upon his baptism by John the Baptism, which for Jesus was an ordination/ anointing to that ministry. With that consecration, he moved up to the Galilee and planted a synagogue in one of the towns. He invited the people to come each Sabbath and listen to his preaching and attend the healing service. The harps, lutes, drums and vocals of the praise band helped set the mood, and soon a thriving congregation was formed, including some of the finest people in town, and they all tithed, as well as giving generously to the poor even though the latter, of course, were not welcome to attend the synagogue worship with such eminent citizens. As with many prominent rabbis in Palestine, Jesus became influential in the Sanhedrin, supporting the Herodians in

their political cooperation and lobby efforts with the Roman Empire, and blessing their policies. He eloquently explained how the Ten Commandments don't literally apply to the leaders.

Wait a minute. Fake news! After his anointing and return to Galilee, Jesus did none of the above. Instead, it describes how many American Christians see mission. Jesus proceeded in a whole different way. He mandated mission and served as a role model for how to do it. He did not do it by "planting" a synagogue. Instead, the whole Incarnation is Jesus moving out of his comfort zone to share in ours, not the other way around. After his anointing, Jesus began by announcing his message, traveling to where people lived and worked. He gathered his disciples where they were, on the shores of the lake by the fishing boats, in the streets and fields, yes, even in the synagogues.

Nor did he seek out the rich and famous, the prominent folks in town. Quite the opposite: he sought the marginal, the poor, those regarding as unrighteous. When he encountered the prominent, he offered them the same message as anyone else and if they accepted it, welcomed them. Most opposed him instead, because he brought a message quite different from what they wanted to hear: God's grace and love are for everyone, not just the self-appointed self-righteous "elect," and not just for Israel but for all people. Nor was God's favor gained by rigid observance of the Law, including the many manmade laws which had accrued to Jewish religion by the First Century. Instead, the message of Jesus, as well as his cousin John, was that none could earn God's favor because all were sinners, and failed to be truly righteous.

Another part of Jesus' mission model was also very distasteful to the elite. In deciding to share his love with us, Jesus did not simply send a Valentine or empower an angel to deliver the Gospel. He became one of us, to be able to fully communicate and experience humanity. This meant giving up the glory of heaven, and radically humbling himself to be, not only fully human, but in humble circumstances as a human. In serving us, in accepting the limitations of being inside the human skin, by living in poverty and homelessness, and ultimately in accepting the burden of our sins in the agony of the Cross. The privileged classes had no desire to share in any of this, much preferring to maintain religion as they knew it, rather than hear the true Gospel.

What can we thus learn from this role model for our own mission initiative?

1. Our society tells us religious discussions should be inside the church walls, not part of everyday life. In contrast, Jesus goes to where we are, every day. Many among us do not agree. They see their personal salvation as important,

they are willing to give a few bucks for someone else to do mission. But it is not for them, they don't want to do it and feel they lack skills. Remember that Jesus also asked if "this cup could pass" from him. He understands. But it turns out the mandate is not optional, not for him, not for us. Every moment of your life communicates who you are and what you are about. You are always Christ's ambassador to all around you and all whom you can seek out. A big part of this Lent's *metanoia* is to face this and re-orient. "To live is Christ" says Paul (Phil. 1:21).

2. We expect others to leave their comfort zone and come to ours. Many church people have no idea how threatening it feels for an unchurched person to enter a church, let alone someone whose previous experience has been ugly. Bishop Fred Fick, a very effective mission pastor, comments that the last place to have an initial encounter with an unchurched person is Sunday morning in church. That encounter should be in their comfort zone, not yours. Like Jesus did it. Since Christianity exists only in a shared community, the newcomer will eventually be guided to our fellowship. But Jesus didn't start there, nor should we.

3. Jesus had to combat a massive misconception of what it meant to be religious in Israel. American churches have projected a similar misconception, that we are the "good people," who disdain others (and since we are observable as not the good people, as hypocrites), that church is about forbidding a whole list of things, especially if they are enjoyable, that church is an artificial world of superficial politeness, where true words are seldom spoken. Unfortunately, our mission, the encounter we have with all the people around us to whom we reflect Christ has to deal with this. It may take time, so don't despair. It will certainly take more than pious exhortations or scolding. The only message you have as a Christian to a non-Christian is that God loves them. Every other thought is at best premature and, more likely, counter-productive.

4. Humility cannot be avoided. When the world sees Christians living in luxury while others suffer dire poverty, when they see Christians exploiting and hurting the Lord's earth instead of selfless stewardship, when the poor, the immigrant, the outcast are unwelcome in the Christian midst (as in Matthew 25), when Christians are heard condemning those who disagree with their views or politics, you are not an ambassador of Christ but rather an obstacle to him.

A Lenten journey which has its focus, not only on your inward struggles, but also on your reorientation to becoming a genuine icon of Christ to others may be long overdue. This Pascha, perhaps you can join the women as they run from the empty Tomb with excitement to share the good news with others.

Lockdown

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A Poem by Bro. Richard Hendrick

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks
of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family

around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighborhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples

are preparing to welcome

and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary

All over the world people are slowing down

and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their
neighbors in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that



Brother Richard Hendrick

Yes there is fear.

But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation.

But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying.

But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness.

But there does not have to be disease
of the soul

Yes there is even death.

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

Spring is coming,

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul

And though you may not be able

to touch across the empty square,

Sing.