

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

January 17, 2016; the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11.

Gifts of the Spirit for the Common Good

This isn't the sermon that I thought I would be preaching today; the Sunday after our great celebration of our Renewed Ministry last Sunday.

It is not completely unlike that sermon, what it would have been, but developments in this past week, both for us as a church family, a faith community incarnate in this time and place, and

internationally for us as the Episcopal Church...have led to a different sermon...as well they should.

Because, as I like to say, our faith, our faith story, is not a fairytale with

limited application but is rather a true living story, that speaks to all of our stories, and just gets more real, and goes deeper, touches us

more deeply, as we bring ourselves and what is real in our lives to it...into conversation with it,

and when I say it...I mean God's story of salvation for us and for the whole world.

And by the way, this is why it is so important to be part of a church

community, and not just be a spiritual person who takes a walk in

the woods on Sunday to commune with God...yes, God is

there in the woods, but it is here in Christian community

that we help each other understand this great story

of salvation, understand not just in our heads

but our hearts,...we help each other discern God's

word for us, as individuals and as community, we

help each other, with the Spirit working through us,

to go deeper into joy as well as to find God even in

the sorrow and in times of challenge.

The Spirit gives us gifts for the common good...as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Last Sunday's service, the Renewal of our Ministry and the Welcoming of our New Rector, was taken from a resource called *Enriching our Worship*, and that service has enriched the Episcopal Church's way of celebrating our new ministry by emphasizing that it *our* ministry, the ministry of all the baptized, the ministry of the community gathered.

Which is why living into our new reality, that Martha, our director of music for 25 years, has a new call from God, is both an occasion for grief but also celebration, for confusion but also faith....for tears, hugs, and affirming words of understanding and gratitude and blessing.

Now today is not Martha's last Sunday with us, that will be Feb. 14th, but given the magnitude of what is happening, I want us to start considering it and living into it from the faith perspective, together as a community.

Together, with God's help, we can honor Martha and ourselves with a good leave-taking experience...and good means real, loving, with sorrow and gratitude, and maybe even hope in the possibilities that God is opening up for Martha and for us.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians speaks to us of God's power to work through a faith community by giving us every gift that we need to be the community God is calling us to be.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Some of the gifts are then named: wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, and discernment among them.

What society calls "skills;" we call gifts, because we know that we have been created in God's image, that our abilities are gifts from God, and that everyone has a gift to share.

For twenty-five years, Martha has shared her gifts with us, gifts of musical

ability, teaching, gifts in community building, gifts for ministry beyond music such as our HoCo Eco group, caring for our creation. I could go on, each of you knows and has experienced Martha and her gifts in many ways.

We are the church we are in large part because of her gifts, her leadership.

And we won't lose that...through Martha, God has given us gifts that we get to keep and build on...even as we will have to let Martha go as she has in faith discerned and accepted a new call...to share her gifts in a new place.

And so we get to be sad, and grieve, while also living into the gratitude that we have for Martha...we will live into that over these next few weeks while she is still with us, and then we will honor her and God by continuing to live into that gratitude as we move forward in

faith as the community God has created and will continue to create.

As Pat Wingo put it last week, "welcome" is at the heart of being God's people. "...welcome is, at its core, trusting in and becoming the hospitality of God...We welcome all those new things that God has done, and we welcome those new things that we trust God will work within us and among us to accomplish through us.

It may be hard for us to welcome this new thing God is doing in Martha's life and in our life as a community.

Initially I wasn't doing very well with this, interiorly, because I was trying to figure it all out, as I do...what it would mean for us, how to handle this. Thinking a lot. Not sleeping a lot.

Thinking---as we know, our greatest gifts can also be our greatest weaknesses if they in a sense become idols and distract us from God.

It was on day three of this new reality, that I prayed with the suggested

verse for January 14th from our booklet, *First We Were Loved*.
 Our spiritual director through this booklet encourages us to place our name
 in these verses from Isaiah, 46:3-4 --Listen to me, Hilary (insert your
 name or Holy Comforter) you have been borne by me from
 your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age
 I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you.
 I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and
 will save.”

Thinking less and praying with this passage has helped me to know on a
 level deeper than my intellect, that God already has this in hand, and
 says, *Listen to me*.

God is carrying all this with us; God is part of this new reality.
 It may take time to welcome it, but as it is of God, we will all be blessed in
 this new thing, and God will “work within us and among us to
 accomplish through us” this new thing.

That might really be enough for a sermon on this day; if it were not for the
 fact that the news is exploding, on Facebook and in our
 Episcopal News Service, even the Washington Post, with
 information about the Primates’ meeting.

The Primates are the heads of Anglican Churches throughout the world;
 Michael Curry is the presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal
 Church.

If you are new to all this Anglican Communion conversation, I’m not going
 to be able to give you enough info today to explain it fully..so the
 summary: around $\frac{2}{3}$ of the Primates think that the Episcopal
 Church should not be part of the Anglican Communion
 anymore because we voted for marriage equality at
 our last General Convention...many of these
 are the same people who wanted us out
 when we started ordaining
 women.

The Primates by a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote, have sanctioned or disciplined (various words

are being used) the Episcopal Church by saying we can't seat and vote on certain boards.

I bring all this up today to be clear that our primate, Michael Curry, and our Episcopal Church, and we, Holy Comforter, are offering a great gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Anglican Communion.

We offer this gift, through the power of the Spirit, to all Christians of all denominations, for the common good.

We have been praying and listening to the Spirit, and we stand by our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being...and part of doing that is supporting people of all genders and sexual orientations and blessing all of our marriages...this is a gift that we as the Church of the Holy Comforter, that many here, had wanted to give before the Episcopal Church as a whole allowed for the blessing and marriage of same-sex couples.

As one of our deputies the General Convention this past summer, I had the privilege and honor of being able to vote for marriage equality.

I loved voting for it then, and I'm even more thankful now that we did.

In my opinion, the only way, if there is a way, to change hearts and minds about marriage equality and LGBT issues generally is to live our lives and run our Church, the Episcopal Church, in a way that makes God's reign visible rather than delaying justice.

As a community of faith, we offer many gifts for the common good to each other and the wider world.

The action by the Primates will not stop our ministry Tanzania, the gifts that we offer to the children in the village of Mzula, Tanzania.

I was in contact with Buck Blanchard, our director of Mission & Outreach for the Diocese, after the vote of the Primates to confirm what I believed, that the true strength of the Anglican Communion is found in our relationships, and that Buck does not anticipate that the Primates' vote will affect the Carpenter's' Kids' program that we

support---to help the poorest of the
poor in Mzula.

This is also who we are as Holy Comforter...many, many of you have gifts
for helping others, what we call our Outreach ministry when we do it
as church.

I will conclude this sermon and wrap it up for us by looking to our Gospel
reading for today.

Into an everyday event, Jesus/God shows up.

God shows up for us.

The wine has run out.

They don't seem to have what they need; there is only water left.

But Jesus does something that no one could have expected, Jesus does
something that does not make logical sense---he turns the water into
wine.

You may wish to pray with this story.

Put yourself into the scene.

How do you feel when the wine runs out?

What does Jesus say to you about how you feel, about what is happening?

What does Jesus do?

God is making all things new.

God makes provision us, for what is needed.

We have seen that in our lives, in the life of our church, in the life of
Episcopal Church.

We have seen the provision of God, and we will see it again and again.

Amen.