

June 18, 2017
Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 6, Year A, RCL
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Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:23

Two Sundays ago we celebrated Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit filled the first believers, inspiring and strengthening them to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. It was perhaps especially appropriate that our two catechumens were confirmed the following Saturday—last Saturday. Remember, according to our Book of Common Prayer, “Confirmation is the rite in which we express a mature commitment to Christ, and receive strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop.”¹ In practice, the bishop places their hands on the head of the confirmand and says this: “Strengthen, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit; empower them for your service; and sustain them all the days of their life.”²

In the very early church, bishops performed a single rite that included both baptism and invocation of the Holy Spirit. Over time the two rites were separated, with baptism given over to priests and confirmation reserved for the bishop. Confirmation remains common in traditions that practice infant and child baptism. The Episcopal Church recognizes confirmations from certain other traditions, including the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions.

The separation of baptism and confirmation raises a question. Baptism is the rite of full initiation into the Body of Christ, so what is the purpose of confirmation? As church geeks like to joke, confirmation is a rite in search of a theology. Confirmation may lack a good theological foundation, but it has solid pastoral justification. When an infant or child is baptized, sponsors make the baptismal promises on their behalf. When that infant or child grows up, confirmation provides an opportunity to make the promises themselves, and thereby to claim Christ as their own.

In our tradition, during what we call services of confirmation, a bishop actually performs three rites. One is the *confirmation* of those who were never confirmed in our tradition or another. The second is *reception* of those who were confirmed in another tradition, such as Roman Catholic or Lutheran, and who wish to formalize their shift to the Episcopal Church. The third is *reaffirmation* of those who have already been confirmed or received, and whose deepening faith has led them to reassert their commitment to the Episcopal Church. Reaffirmation is most common among those who were confirmed as teenagers and whose growth in years has led them to make a fully adult commitment to the faith.

I'm explaining all this partly because St. Thomas's includes many people who come here from other traditions and who are therefore unfamiliar with Episcopal practice. However, the more important reason is that it's related to other aspects of our ministry together. During confirmation preparation, participants delve into the Episcopal and Anglican traditions, but it isn't just about facts. It's about using the lenses of those tradition to view God and the Body of Christ, especially in relation to this place, at this time. The real goal of all such study is to develop a deeper relationship with God, and a stronger commitment to Christ's work in the world.

At least, I hope that's what we did during confirmation prep. *And*, I hope that's what we're always doing, in so very many ways, in this church.

Starting with today's liturgy, our liturgical color is green until the beginning of the next church year, which is in November, the first Sunday of Advent. So far this church year we've had the seasons of Advent and Christmas, a short period of Ordinary time after Epiphany, and the seasons of Lent and Easter. Each of these seasons revolves around a big event or theme in the life of Jesus. Now we're into the long season of Ordinary Time after Pentecost. To clarify, Ordinary Time is when we're not recognizing a particular feast or fast. It's the time when we see Jesus occupied with the more usual aspects of his work: teaching, preaching, and healing.

Today's reading from Matthew includes this, with a twist: Jesus teaches, preaches, and heals, *and* he dispatches his followers to do the same. He doesn't make the job description sound particularly attractive. There are lots of ways this sermon could go, but I want to focus on one small detail. The first two sentences of the second paragraph includes this: "Jesus summoned his twelve *disciples*"³ and "These are the names of the twelve *apostles*"⁴ [emphasis mine].

Though we often use them interchangeably, the words *disciple* and *apostle* have slightly different meanings. The Twelve named in today's reading are described first as disciples and then as apostles. This story catches them at the turning point between the two roles. First they are students who learn from the master by listening to him and watching him at work; then they are messengers sent by the master to carry the Good News in both word and deed. Remember, this story happens pretty early in the Gospel of Matthew, which infers that they are still new at this Jesus stuff. It seems to me that they are still students, learning by living the example of Jesus, and then returning to Jesus for more learning.

Last Sunday was our annual special celebration of the Holy Trinity. I don't remember ever learning why Trinity Sunday is always the Sunday after Pentecost. It does seem appropriate—with the conferral of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Trinitarian presence in the life of the world was made complete. Remember the words of the bishop at confirmation: "Strengthen, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit; empower them for your service; and sustain them all the days of their life."⁵ In this action, the invocation of the Holy Spirit also marks a turn from disciple to apostle; as apostles we learn more about discipleship; and so goes the cycle.

Bishops Ian and Laura, with clergy and lay people from around Connecticut, recently explored this question: What is a parish? It's a good question as we seek to understand how to "do church" in our changing times. I'm going to channel bishop Ian by bringing out a flip chart. The bishops have recently begun rolling out the result of that conversation, saying a parish is:

- a community of theological imagination,
- fed by word and sacrament,
- empowering disciples and apostles in God's mission,
- and connected to the wider Body of Christ.

It's worth considering as we together continue to discern the unfolding path ahead for St. Thomas's. At Junior Warden Don Edwards' suggestion, the Vestry will use this formulation as a reference point for its work.

The program year for both Church and Day School ended last week, and your leadership is already planning for next year. If you've been here a while, you know there was a lot to do when I arrived. We have had many successes already. But we have continued to struggle with education programming for all ages. You've heard a lot about Sunday School for the children, but youth and adult programs have also been slow going. Formation programs are especially important to the formation of disciples and apostles. I think we're on a positive restart, in this and other areas, with the new Vestry structure that has just been put into place. If you haven't heard, each member of the Vestry has chosen an area in which to focus their attention. They're aren't to do everything; they're to help you figure out how you might be called to participate. It's a big step as St. Thomas's grows in its conception and deployment of lay leadership.

Each one of you has a part in all this. Which brings us to the mystical word *discernment*. When one is near a seminary, one hears this sentence a lot: Jane Smith is discerning a call to ordained priesthood. But discernment isn't just for those seeking ordination. Discernment is for every one of us, *and* it's for us as a gathered community. What is God saying? How will we respond?

Notes

¹ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 860.

² *BCP*, 418.

³ Matthew 10:1a, NRSV.

⁴ Matthew 10:2a, NRSV.

⁵ *BCP*, 418.