

September 10, 2017  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18, Year A, RCL  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 149  
Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

If not you're ordained and/or on the Divinity School faculty, I have a couple of questions for you. Do you think of yourself as a theologian? Do you think of yourself as a priest? If those questions are surprising or uncomfortable, then listen carefully to this: *You* are a theologian. *You* are a priest.

It's true, you know. It's true whether or not you have been ordained or earned a Ph.D. It's true simply because you're here. If you're here, you have some conception of God—God in being, and God in action. That makes you a theologian. If you're here, your conception of God affects *your* being and your action. That makes you a priest. It's as simple as that.

Some of us are professional theologians; some of us are professional priests. Our professional endeavors are our paid work, which is a gift—and a responsibility. Others of you are *not* paid—at least not monetarily—still, you also have the gift and the responsibility. If we are *professionals*, then you are *amateurs*—amateur theologians and amateur priests.

Sometimes that word is used derisively, as in, “What an amateur!” That's not what I mean. The word *amateur* comes from the French word meaning “lover of,” and that originates in the Latin words for “to love” and “lover.”

The professional acts from obligation; the amateur, for love. In this case, the professional is not a substituted for the amateur. The professional may be more exalted, but the amateur may be more important. For example, take today's New Testament readings. Some of the individual words are a bit cryptic, but the overall message seems clear: Love your neighbor; your actions matter. When it comes to love, the amateurs may be ahead of the professionals.

In the course of the church year, there are two occasions when your priest usually does a congregational check-in from the pulpit: startup Sunday and annual meeting Sunday. To use an analogy from government speechifying, you might say that startup Sunday is like an inauguration, and annual meeting Sunday is like the state of the Union.

Today is Startup Sunday or “inauguration day” for our new church program year. There are some similarities between churchly and governmental inaugurations. For one thing, rooms have been cleared and refilled, literally and metaphorically. For another, people are needed to make ideas reality. You'll get to talk to some of the leaders of the efforts here after church, at our Open House and Ministry Fair.

I'm keeping this short, in the hope that you will spend more time at the Open House and Ministry Fair. We hope you learn more about of what the church is up to, and find out how to plug in. We hope the event is a celebration of this truly wonderful community of faith and the individuals who make it so.

One more thing. Inaugurations often involve people, and this one does, too. It's not that you're inaugurating me. I would say it's more like we're inaugurating each other. And maybe that's sort of like an ordination. One common tradition during the ordination of a deacon or priest happens at the end of the sermon. The preacher asks the almost-deacon or -priest to stand for their "charge"—instructions for their future vocation.

On this inauguration day, I want to do something like that with you, you who are theologians and priests for the love of it. Some of you might even be professionals and amateurs, too. So please stand as you are able. Here is your charge:

- If you are an amateur theologian and priest, don't let yourself be intimidated by the professionals. When it comes down to it, we are all acting on faith, that is, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." [Hebrews 11:1, NRSV.]
- Be gentle and kind with yourself; it will help you be gentle and kind with others. This is not selfish; authentic self-love teaches you how to love others.
- Build the relationships that will sustain you when you need love, and reach out when you do.
- Embrace your vocation as theologian and priest. Let it fire your desire to touch God, and to serve as conduit between God and others.
- Cultivate your amateurism through the being and doing that expresses your love for God and for your neighbors near and far.
- Do not be afraid. God is with you.

Please be seated.