

**Proper 6A - 6/15/08
St. David's**

I don't know if any of you can remember anything before the unbelievable service Thursday night. I know it will be forever etched in my memory. But let me try to take you back to last Sunday for a moment. Some of you may recall that on that day, I made a wisecrack about my visits to non-lectionary based churches, that is, churches where Biblical readings are not assigned each week, but instead chosen by the local pastor. I said that it seemed like every time I have visited one, the Pastor chose to preach on either one of the Pastoral Epistles or the Book of Revelation. I was exaggerating of course, but it is also true that when ministers are left to make their own choices about what to preach on, you can bet they are not going to choose a text that disagrees with their own theology. That's why Christians of a certain bent very much prefer to preach on Revelation and First and Second Timothy, while I would rather avoid them like the plague. Therein lies the beauty of the three year lectionary cycle. By following it, I have no choice but to preach on not just the parts of the bible that I agree with, but also the parts with which I struggle immensely. I

think this is good not just because it widens all of our horizons and deepens our understanding of the text, but it makes it virtually impossible to not realize that there are parts of our sacred text that directly conflict with other parts. This helps us understand the Bible for what it is, a series of many different books written by many different people, influenced by very different cultures and social situations, all struggling to come to terms with and articulate their faith.

All that is well and good of course, until the lectionary pulls up one of those texts with which you have struggled for many years to interpret. Today, my fellow St. Davidite's, is one of those Sundays when I am confronted with a text that seems to directly conflict with me understanding of the Good News. Perhaps this is some sort of cosmic payback for my wisecrack last week. The Gospel you just heard is one that also appears in the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke, in slightly different forms. If the truth be told, I much prefer those other two versions, while I have always struggled with today's.

It all starts out innocently enough, sounding very much like I understand Jesus' call to the disciples and to us and very much in

concert with the mission statement of St. David's. Like the story of the great catch of fish and the feeding of the 5000, we are told about God's theology of abundance, this time in the form of a gigantic harvest that is so big that the laborers cannot gather it all. That wonderful metaphor suggests a world waiting to be filled with the message of God's love and abundance for all, and the fact that many are needed to bring this good news to all so that each may experience it for themselves.

That message, of course, is the hallmark of St. David's. It permeated our dedication service Thursday evening and is visible in everything we do in bringing abundance to all. It also feels like we often feel. We've got plenty of good news to spread to the whole world and sometimes we feel a bit overwhelmed because there are not enough of us to spread it all.

But then we get to those next set of verses. Instead of this universal vision of spreading God's news to all, instead of sending the disciples far and wide to all corners of the earth as suggested in the Gospel of Luke, we hear this. *"Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of*

Israel.”

O my. What, exactly, are we to make of this? It sounds ever so much that Jesus is now saying, forget about spreading abundance to all of those in need and to all of the world, but rather, let’s keep this all at home. It sounds like Jesus is saying that the St. David’s interpretation of the Gospel is very mistaken, that maybe those who choose to only help and care for their own people may have a valid point. It sounds like Jesus is really saying that only the chosen ones who deserve it are the ones to whom we should go. Left to my own devices, you can see why I would never choose to preach on this Gospel.

But because our lectionary forces us to confront this text, our understanding of the Bible can only be expanded. We begin with the realization that this is not at all what Jesus says in both the Lukan and Mark version of this text. In both of them, Jesus sends the disciples out to all. Why then, are his words so different in Matthew?

The clue for me comes in realizing that the community to whom Matthew is writing, is in a much different place than either Mark or Luke’s. This becomes obvious only when we read past the official end

of today's Gospel. That's why I kept reading this morning after your text in the bulletin ended. What we heard in those verses is that Matthew's community, much like the one the author of the Gospel of John is writing to, are being persecuted. Jesus talks about them being dragged in front of authorities because of their following of his radical message. He talks about them being beaten. Where does this occur? In the synagogues. Matthew's community is not being attacked from the outside, but the inside. It is their own Jewish sisters and brothers who are persecuting them. The fight that is going on is a family fight. This is all about one group of Jews telling another group that they have strayed from the faith, and therefore, they need to get out.

That's why unlike Luke and Mark's version of this story, Matthew has Jesus telling the disciples to evangelize to their own people. When we understand what is going on Matthew's community, we realize that today's Gospel is not contrary to the inclusive Gospel of Jesus, but rather the same challenging advice that Jesus always gives us. He tells the disciples that they are to go and evangelize and care for the very people who are persecuting them. What Jesus is doing is calling the disciples and us to reconcile with the people who are trying

to hurt us.

In fact, I would suggest that what today's Gospel is telling us is that it is in the midst of polarization and division and the resulting wounds caused as a result, that we are called to live out the good news. This means that we must be willing to sit in the pain of exclusiveness so that the world may be healed. To put it in different words that Jesus uses elsewhere, we must be willing to bless others when they persecute us. We are called to care for others compassionately, even while they accuse us of being evil and not from God.

That, of course, is beyond difficult. But what Jesus tells us today is if we can pull it off, if we can respond with love when someone hits us with hate, everything will begin to change. In fact, it is this approach to the Gospel that brings about the abundant harvest that Jesus talks about today. It is the act of caring for our neighbors when they are slapping us in the face that creates the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, or the great catch of fish or the abundant harvest so huge that the laborers cannot get it all into the barn. Very simply, blessing others when they hurt us will create abundance.

Not only is it difficult to continue to turn the cheek when you are being attacked, but it also seems counter intuitive to accept the notion that by so doing we could possibly be helping anything. But I first learned the lesson that blessing people who respond to us in hate creates abundance by watching my great Uncle Herb. Many of you have heard about my Uncle Herb before, the one who surrounded everyone with laughter and food, no matter who they were, no matter what they did to him. By so doing, Uncle Herb constantly created joy, and he lived in more abundance than any person I have ever known, without ever having an ounce of disposable income in his life.

If you have any doubt that our willingness to bless someone as they continue to attack us really creates abundance, all you need do is think about Thursday night. All you need do is look at this building that has grown up around us.

There are many things that made St. David's grow beyond its tiny old building. But it all began with abundance. It all began when we decided together that we would refuse to live into scarcity ever again. It all began when we started caring for others, even when some said we could not care for ourselves. It all began when we preached that

Gospel of inclusivity and abundance to all, even those who slandered us for doing so.

Those of you who were here at the time remember oh so well the attacks we received when we lived into Jesus' call. Like Matthew's community, those attacks were not from the outside, but the inside. It was not people of other faiths or the unchurched that attacked us, but rather our fellow Christians. It all came to a head when another pastor in this town wrote a letter to the editor in the Lake Powell Chronicle about our contemplative prayer series that we offered to the community that first year. It seems that this pastor felt that there is no biblical precedent for listening to God. "Regarding Rev. Keplinger's prayer program," the letter began, "he seems to blurring the lines between Biblical Christianity and other faiths...The Bible (the final authority for Christians), teaches us to...lift up our voice to the Lord and I called to my God and He heard my voice. Jesus taught when you pray, say: Father; and his prayer exemplified in John 17, is an outloud monologue to the Father. Prayer by biblical definition," the pastor wrote, "IS talking to God.

Rev. Keplinger's teachings on 'prayer' sound more like Hindu's

transcendental meditation. Techniques that psychology and medicine call relaxation therapy; more basic to physiology than spirituality.”

And my favorite part, “Rev. Keplinger’s statements are understandable. In his own statements he has not referred to himself as a Christian, but as a panentheist, a combination of process theology (finite-godism) - Darwinianism applied to theology and Hinduism. And, his teachings on prayer seem to be the mis-matched, contradicting theologies of the New Age.

Rev. Keplinger is entitled to teach what he chooses. My concern, as President of the Page Association of Evangelicals, is that the community of Page understand that what Rev. Keplinger is teaching as prayer sounds more like eastern mysticism than the ancient teachings and sacred traditions of biblical Christianity. Also, the people of Page need to know that Rev. Keplinger, though he has sat in on some of our meetings, is not a recognized member of the Page Association of Evangelicals (being a divergent theological bent and standards of social morality).” Very much like that early Matthew community in the synagogue, this local pastor found it his duty to attempt to remove us from inside the walls of Christianity.

After this attack and the inquisition that followed to officially remove me from the ministerial association, I have to tell you that the sentence in our Biblical text that I most related to is also found in today's Gospel. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Despite this and other attacks, everyone at St. David's managed to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. We did not respond in anger to that letter or anything else. We reached out our hand in compassion and love. We prayed for them and we continued to evangelize them.

The next thing you knew, the paper was overwhelmed with letters of support for this congregation and what we were doing. They received 23 letters in response to the pastor's words, every single one of them supporting us and our theology. And just as Jesus teaches us today, abundance occurred for us because we were able to continue caring for those who attacked us. It was that letter and our response in love to it, that brought the first wave of people to this church. By returning blessing for accusation, St. David's grew and grew and grew to the place we experienced Thursday night, a church overflowing with people from all denominations and no denominations coming together

as one, just as Jesus promises us today.

We have made huge progress in gaining the respect and admiration of leaders across Page to Kanab and back across the rez. We have also caught the eye of faith leaders across the nation. Craig Wirth, our diocesan communications director who filmed our grand dedication on Thursday, told me the Presiding Bishop wrote to the diocese after her visit this spring, and told us that it was your commitment to creation that will stick with her the most about this diocese. This building is a testament to your willingness to preach to our fellow Christians and it is proof that abundance does happen when we do so.

But the challenges ahead remain daunting. Most of you know that when we were looking for a home when we were without a church, our neighbors on each side of us turned us down flat. Many others still believe that the abundance we have created is not from God. So we will continue on, evangelizing to our fellow Christians, and preaching Jesus' Gospel of compassion and inclusion of all; to all.

If we can do so, I have no doubt that we will continue to experience the abundance of a gigantic harvest, a harvest so big we

will have to look for more and more laborers to haul it all in. Thank you all for not being afraid to dream the dream and for carrying that harvest to our neighbors and to all. Amen.