

Proper 9C, 6 Pentecost, 4 July 2010 Bob Partlow

If Jesus were to return to this world which we, for now, experience as one bounded by time and space, I wonder if he would be in church this morning? If he were, would he recognize it? Or would he say that we need make some basic changes to return the church to his vision? Would he say that this is what he sent the 70 out to create?

Now don't get me wrong, I love the church. I was raised in the Lutheran Church and I recognize now that I was hooked on liturgy, ritual, and mystery at an early age. Actually, my love of the church has only increased with time. The more I become comfortable with the wonders of God's ongoing open ended revelation and creation and accept my own cognitive limitations, the more I embrace and need the liturgy of the Church to enable me to live into the great mystery of the gift of life. To me our liturgy expresses truths that are beyond the bounds of words....beyond the realm of knowing.

But would Jesus recognize the Church today? Are we being called, not to give up our beloved traditions, but to become truer to the church that Jesus sent out the 70 and us to be?

Consider the commissioning and sending of the 70 (or if you prefer the 72, but that is another story). 70 or 72, the point is that it is a large number. In Biblical symbolism, the number 7 represents completeness ----thus creation required seven days to be completed. How many times was Naaman told to wash in the Jordan River? Seven! And was his skin not made **completely** healed? One might say his face was as smooth as a baby's bottom. 70 then represents a total sense of completeness. In Genesis, the descendents of Noah were 70 nations. The sense then of the Gospel is that Jesus sent workers ahead of him to all the nations, all the people of the world to bring the good news of the Gospel of God's love and acceptance. He sent the 70 and he sends us to go everywhere he intends to go. He did not send 70 Bishops or 70 Priests, just 70 people who had themselves experienced the good news. Have you not experienced the good news? Could you not go?

Our Episcopal theology recognizes the ministry of all people...in theory...the catechism speaks of four orders of ministers: Lay, Bishops, Priests, and deacons. But do we really reflect that? This is an area where I believe Jesus would say that we are off course. I have had two personal experiences upon which I often reflect. When I was near the end of the approval process before going to seminary, I was appearing before either the Commission on Ministry or the Standing Committee and one of the members sort of sighed and said "Yes, I agree. Bob should be approved....but it is a shame to lose such a good layman". That comment continues to echo in my mind. We think of ordination as a step up, a higher calling...but is it? Really? The second event was a conference I went to shortly after we were ordained where the conference chaplain was a woman priest who had been one of the early ordained women.....she had given more than one pound of flesh to be ordained. At one point she said "If I had ever been offered the opportunity to serve the church as an adult, I never would have sought ordination". Are we looking into our binoculars

backwards? Are we making the church smaller than Christ created it to be by failing to understand and develop the ministry of all people? I think so.

Consider again the story of Naaman. There are many powerful, important people in this wonderful story: Naaman, a powerful warrior, his wife, the King of Aram, The King of Israel and a mighty prophet and Holy man Elisha.....and O yes, a slave girl who served Naaman's wife. This is a healing story...and who is the key, essential actor in this healing (besides God)? I can imagine the slave girl encountering a distraught, weeping mistress.....distraught because of her husband's illness. The girl tells her mistress that she knows of a Holy man in Samaria who might be able to cure Naaman. The slave girl is the key to the healing. She is not unlike what we are envisioning as a Recovery Advocate; a person who might be able to refer people to a source of healing. This is a ministry....the slave girl is the minister in this story.

And then there is the wonderful account of Naaman's encounter with Elisha. He almost rejected God's healing

because Elisha did not put on fancy vestments, chant special prayers or have magical incantations. The reality is that God works through all people.....everyone can lay on hands and pray for another's healing. With a little training, everyone can visit the sick and shut-ins bringing them communion. Everyone can learn how to lead groups in Morning or Evening Prayer including preaching. You do not need seminary...note the Naaman story again; who set Naaman right so that he could receive God's healing? A servant! To our disgrace, the Episcopal Church has virtually abandoned Campus ministry because of the expense of priests...why can't that be a lay ministry. The list goes on and on...and they are all examples of us looking in the wrong end of the binoculars, making the church look small when it is called to be huge...everywhere....catholic (catholic means universal!).

You were called and empowered for ministry at your baptism. There are times in every life of course when we are too hurting, too broken and bruised to minister to others. Sometimes we just need to come here to experience God's love

and acceptance. Sometimes we just need the peace of Christ. That is understood. But you will know that you are healed and whole when you are again ready and compelled to serve others in the name of Christ. Amen.