

Proper 9, Pentecost IV
July 5, 2009

It's a great Sunday for a Baptism, but it's going to take me a minute or two to get around to that. That's because this afternoon, I join Gwen and Tom and Mary and about 10,000 other people, on the great trek Anaheim, California, for the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. It'll be a hoot. General Convention is the gathering of the many varied, distinctive, and sometimes quarreling clans that make up the international Episcopal Church. It meets every three years, (which is plenty often enough) and all of the biggies are there. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Presiding Bishop, well over 200 other Bishops, and around 800 clerical and lay deputies from every diocese we have will all be there. That's not counting the national staff people, the representatives of various church organizations and agencies, the Episcopal Church Women's Triennial, and a host of vendors, camp followers and hangers-on. I always take a lot of pictures.

We'll pretend that we're the Episcopal Church. We'll make decisions for the whole church (although, when you get right down to, only a few of them will have much effect on St. Nicholas'—but those will matter). We'll debate all sorts of things we need to talk about as well as even more that we have no business talking about; and everyone will come home exhausted with, one prays, some sense of accomplishment that the church has met and acted.

But I have a theory about all of these Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and more or less professional church workers, myself included. I suspect that God called many of us to Ordination or similar work as a sort of special mercy—and that such work is gift from God to some of the weaker brethren (and sistern) who otherwise just couldn't cut the mustard. That's because God knew that without this special calling we would most likely never quite get around to the basics of the Christian life—to saying our prayers or reading the Bible or going to Church or working seriously on our Baptismal Vows, to things like that. So, to encourage us in the basics, and to give us a break from the hardest work of ministry, God pointed us toward Ordination or full-time church work. An act, perhaps of pity.

Which leads rather smoothly into the Gospel today, and into one piece of Hailee's and all of our Baptism. It's early in his public ministry, and Jesus has gone back to his home town. He returns to the synagogue where he grew up, (where he was probably an acolyte and a member of the youth group, all of that) and he proceeds to preach one whiz-bang sermon. The people in the synagogue realize that Jesus has something important to say, and that if they take him seriously, they will need to take a hard look at their lives and at their behavior. So, they conveniently decide not to take him seriously. They decide that, since he's a local boy who they know well, and whose family they know well, he can't have anything important to say about God.

After all, to have something important to say about God you have to be different; you have to come from a long way off, you have to have all sorts of credentials, and you have to be a little mysterious, a bit out of the ordinary. You have to be an expert and go to General Convention. That was hardly a new attitude way back then, and it hasn't changed much since. (By the way, I expect that Mary, Tom, Gwen, and I will be a whole lot smarter in Anaheim than we are here—especially if we carry briefcases.)

So those folks in Jesus' home town pretty much missed the whole thing. What Jesus did was the best he could. It was hard, trying to be who he was in his home town, and there wasn't much visible progress, but he hung in there; and he made a little difference.

But it was a struggle, living out God's call in his home town. It still is. It's the toughest gig of all. And that's not what the folks in Anaheim will be doing. But this is what each one of you, each and every day, are always about doing. You are about living out the faith in the place where you live.

And that's why I, and I suspect most of the clergy, stand in some real awe of you, of lay folk, and of what you promise to do, and what you try to do.

You come here, week in and week out, (some more weeks than others, but still) you come here, receive the sacraments, hear the word, confess the creed, say your prayers, and then go out there, out into the real world of real people, out into Midland, Texas, and try to make all of that real. That's impressive. You all spend most of your time with non-Christians, or (especially in Texas) with Christians who are really, really different from us Episcopalians. You go into a world that doesn't care very much about what we value and say is central and most important.

You live daily in the midst of people you know and who know you, (sometimes all too well). You come face to face with the reality of the world of Midland's families, businesses, board rooms, classrooms, civic groups, voting booths, workplaces, marriages, social events and so much more. And it is here, in the midst of a world and a culture that are indifferent, confused, hostile, and just plain weird, it is here that you try, day in and day out, to live out the promises of Hailee's baptism and of your own.

It's here that you work at discovering what it really looks like to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ; it's here that you are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of every human being. And that's hard. I look at what you do and frankly I marvel. The responsibility and the opportunity and all the rest that goes with being a Christian in the world is really something.

One the other hand, like most clergy, I spend virtually all of my time not just with Christians, but with Episcopalians—the very best kind of Christians. Like most clergy, I live mainly in the world of the parish, where we do share (pretty much) the same faith and the same values. (Although the eve of General Convention might not be the best time to say that.)

I very seldom do what you do all of the time. Meanwhile, our Bishops, bless their hearts, spend most of *their* time, not just with Episcopalians, but with Episcopal *clergy* for heaven's sake. For all our foibles, we clergy are usually not as challenging to deal with as a culture that is slipping farther and farther away from even a nominal consensus about matters of faith and value, a culture that does not even pretend to support you in what you are trying to do. There's really no contest as to who has the most difficult, the most challenging, and, in the long run, the most significant ministry.

What it looks like for real people to live out your baptismal covenant in our particular part of the real world and at this particular time in history, this is a challenge—it's the greatest challenge the church faces. I can't do it for you, all the clergy and other pros at General Convention can't do it for you, (but our job, really, is to help; that's why we're here); after all, like I said, one of the reasons that we're clergy and church pros is that we probably couldn't do ourselves. But this is the gift and the glory of your calling as baptized persons. It is the primary ministry of the Christian Church.

Remember that, and cherish it. Never disparage it; and never let the clergy pretend that we can take it away from you. This business of living out the Christian faith in the real world, this is the vocation into which we baptize Hailee today, and which we promise to nurture and support in her and in one another. And remember, too, that it is not only the real ministry of Christ that is yours.

There is more—the gifts of Christ, all of the gifts of Christ, are yours. The love of Christ, all of the love of Christ, is yours. The presence of Christ, the full and eternal presence of Christ, is yours, and the spirit and the strength of Christ, that, too, is hers and yours. For God has said to us, as God says plainly this day to Hailee, “you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.”