

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Proper 18, Year C, September 8, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Our Priorities"
Philemon 1-21, Romans 1:12, Luke 14:25-33, Ephesians 3:20-21

God, wrap us round on every side; place your hand upon us
[~ Psalm 139:4 song paraphrase]

Good morning Grace and Holy Trinity; what a long and fruitful history this parish has; depending on whether you calculate it from the founding of Grace Church, or of Holy Trinity Church, or of their merging into Grace and Holy Trinity Church; but what strikes me more profoundly than the age of the two parishes that have bequeathed us their names, is the importance of those two names in and of themselves: Grace and Holy Trinity

we have grace, which is the kind of love that only God can give; grace is the kind of love that God has given to us; grace is the kind of love that God wants us to share with others, to the best of our human ability, so that they will come to know God's loving grace for themselves

we have Holy Trinity, which is not so much a theological concept as it is a recognition that God has chosen to relate to us in three very personal and loving ways: as Yahweh our Maker, as Jesus our Savior, as Holy Spirit our Redeemer; and each of us is invited to grow more fully into each of those relationships throughout our entire lives

we have been given grace and we have been given a relationship with God through three persons of the Holy Trinity; we have in our parish name a reminder of this double portion of the very best that God has to offer us; what a tremendous responsibility we all share in living up to our name; and if we take a little time each day to reflect upon these gifts of grace and of the Holy Trinity that each of us has, and be thankful for these gifts, and be mindful of how we can actively respond to these gifts, that will give us a powerful daily reminder of how to approach each day of our lives—with grace, in active relationship with God

looking at today's readings, I find direction there for the time we will be spending together during this interim year; Paul writing to Philemon says, "I have received much joy and encouragement from your love;" what can be more important than joy, encouragement, and love? this brings to mind a similar passage, where Paul says to the Romans (1:12) that he longs to be with them "so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine;" in today's context I understand that "each other's" to mean both between you and me, and also between each of you; what a great way to look at shared ministry; let's take that to heart as a guiding prayer for our time together: may we, all of us, be mutually encouraged by each other's faith

is there direction for us in Luke's Gospel reading? here we have some of Jesus' harshest words; but what all of his talk about hate and possessions boils down to is this: when push comes to shove, what really is the most important thing in your life? it must be God in Christ; it is a question of priority; there cannot be two or more most important things in your life; but if God truly is the most important thing in your life, then everything else will fall into its proper place; then, all of your human relationships will be relationships of love; then, your relationship with your possessions will not be one of love

there is another passage that can help us, as a parish, keep our proper priorities in mind: Ephesians 3:20-21; you may recognize it as one of the final collects in both Morning and Evening Prayer (you can find it at the bottom of page 102 in your prayer book if you want to follow along); it is a prayer, as even the "Amen" is part of the Bible text; it follows a statement about the love of God which Christ has given us; and it is because of this love that we give, as our response, this prayer of praise: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen;" so what does this prayer have to say to us, about our priorities in ministry together?

"Glory to God" means God must be the focus of our time together; any focus other than God is a distraction; all that we do together needs to be done with a conscious focus on God

God's power "working in us" means every one of us has a job to do; our minds, our hearts, our hands, and our souls are the tools God uses to bring about God's desires for this church and God's desires for the larger community which we serve

that the power of God within us "can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine" doesn't mean we don't ask, or we don't imagine, but that we don't allow our limited human abilities of prayer and imagination to place any restrictions upon what we expect God can accomplish with us; we are supposed to ask big; we are supposed to dream big; we are supposed to expect big—from each other and from God

giving God glory "from generation to generation" means we cannot live in the past; our living faith impels us to move on toward the future making sure that our faith is getting actively passed on to the next generations of younger adults, teenagers, and children

we give God glory "in the Church," remembering that church is people, not buildings; we must continually rethink how we invite and extend participation to ever larger definitions of just exactly who is "in the church," in our community of responsibility, and in our community of ministry

"in Christ Jesus" means God is not remote from us; Christ has been present with this parish since its founding, and will continue being present with us; but this is a special time to look for Christ's presence in new ways, in new places, and in new faces

"for ever and ever" means that all that we do now, in our lifetime, has lasting eternal consequences, but not only for us; it also has lasting eternal consequences for the people around us whose lives we touch

and finally, "Amen" reminds us that our approach to everything we do as individuals, as groups, and as an entire parish, must be based on prayer, because only in such prayerfulness can we align ourselves fully with God's priorities and with God's purposes

I pray that we will all allow such Biblical directions to set the tone and the priorities for all that we will do together in ministry, during this interim time, for however much time we have together ahead of us