

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2020
St. Paul's, Wilmington, NC
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna

A few years ago I had the privilege of going on a sabbatical. I spent my sabbatical in England and stayed at an Anglican Seminary called Wescott House in Cambridge. It was on Jesus Street across the street from Jesus College, so if ever I got lost, I could always say I was looking for Jesus. In Cambridge, there is an Anglican Church on nearly every street. Many of them have closed, or been re-purposed as shops, restaurants, concert halls, art galleries, gyms, and community outreach centers. One day, I was touring a church in which, unsurprisingly, I happened to be the sole occupant, when a group of teenage girls came running in chattering away in French. They each carried a note pad and a pencil. They came up to me and asked in English, fortunately for me, “who is the head of this church? They became very frustrated when I replied, as any good Anglican would— Well that depends on what you mean by the head of the church... Jesus, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the parish council, the vicar of this parish. They looked at me like I had two heads because all they wanted was a simple one word answer that they could write on their notepads. They were in a hurry and wanted a quick answer. It turns out that they were a group of students from Leon who were on a “savager hunt.” Their next quest was to find the atomic clock invented by Steven Hawking.

The answer they were expecting from me was: “Queen Elizabeth.” The queen is the official head of the Church of England. She is in charge. In today’s gospel lesson, we learn that Jesus makes the impetuous, faltering, three time denier, Peter the head of the church. “You are Peter,” he says, “and on this rock I will build my church.” As the head of the church, J. gives Peter tremendous authority and power. He says: “I will give you the keys of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Later on, when Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room after the resurrection, he breathes on them and says, “receive the Holy Spirit.” He ordains them as priests— he gives them power and authority; he says to them, “If you retain the sins of anyone, they are retained, if you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.”

How would you like to have that kind of power? Actually, I do have that kind of power. Adam does as well. After we confess our sins, the priest has the authority to say the Absolution, the declaration of God’s remission and forgiveness of our sins. Making the sign of the cross, the priest says, “May Almighty God forgive you of all your sins and give you the grace of consolation of the Holy Spirit.” That priestly authority is passed down through Apostolic Succession, the laying on of hands and the receiving Holy Spirit in an unbroken line of succession of priests from Jesus to Peter, all the way down through the

centuries, to Adam and to me and to all who came before and will come after. One could argue that the line has taken detours from time to time. Nonetheless, there has been continuity of doctrine, teaching, and discipline that remains unbroken. My authority as a priest is given through apostolic succession. I have some other authority as your Interment Rector that you may not realize. I have the authority, with my Bishop's consent, to refuse to give you Holy Communion if I am aware of your unwillingness to repent for a notorious sin. I have never exercised that authority, but I have it. I have the authority over the conduct of worship and music. I have the authority to hire and dismiss staff. I don't have the authority to pay them, the Vestry does that in tandem with its fiduciary responsibilities. I have the authority of "full and free discharge of all functions and duties, pertaining to the control of the church and parish buildings, the Rector shall, at all times be entitled to the use and control of the Church and Parish buildings with the appurtenances and furniture thereof." Lest you think I am mad with power, there is a man who lives in Kinston called the Bishop of the Diocese of East Carolina who can, for good cause, take my authority away.

Authority is tricky business. Its abuse, unfortunately, is too common in business, politics, law, and sometimes even the church. Authority, not paired with responsibility and humility, is a recipe for disaster. The purpose of my authority is rooted in my ordination vows. I am to proclaim the good news of

the gospel, to live faithfully according to its precepts, to love and serve all people, the young and old, the strong and weak, the rich and poor. The purpose of my authority to preach, to declare God's forgiveness, to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of the Eucharist. I am to encourage you to be the body of Christ. Priests are called to coax you, pray for you, nudge you, beg you, cajole, strongly suggest, persuade you, advise you, model for you, urge you, admonish you, love you into using the gifts God has given you to make Christ known to the world. We all have gifts for ministry. We all have the capacity to be witnesses for God's love and forgiveness in a confused and hurting world. We can all proclaim the the good news; we can all work for justice and peace; we can all be merciful and compassionate; we can all love our neighbors. Today, in his Letter to the Romans, Paul spells out the power we have been given— life giving, life-changing power. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith, ministry, in ministering, the teacher, in teaching, the exhorter in exhortation, the giver, in generosity, the leader in diligence, the compassionate in cheerfulness. We have the power, but we so often set it aside and get caught up in minutiae of self-interest, locked into a mindset of doing things the same way we have always done them. We get paralyzed by anxiety. We get caught up in the battle between moving forward in faith, or remain stuck in helplessness. We get waylaid in matters, which, in the great scheme of things, mean little.

The task before us is to use the gifts God has given us, boldly, collegially, unashamedly, unreservedly, faithfully, and patiently. The task before us is made more urgent as we grapple with the anxiety and uncertainty of a world wide pandemic, the stain of racism, the fight in our souls between faith and fear. There is so much untapped energy and hope imbedded in the members of this congregation. So many possibilities to share the gifts God has given us in proportion to our abilities. There are folks who have held back and now are invited to step up and contribute their gifts for ministry. If we spend our time, and energy, and resources, focusing on sharing those gifts with friends neighbors, strangers, yes, even with enemies, we can usher in the reign of God right here, right now. Instead of being fearful of one another, we can learn to walk together to make a better world.

What gifts can you offer to others, to this parish, to this community, to your neighbors and friends, to the fearful and lonely and dispossessed? God has given you an abundance of gifts to offer— the gifts of hospitality, the gifts of listening, the gift of pastoral care, the gift of generosity of resources, the gift of compassion, the gift of teaching, the gift of imagination. These gifts flourish and grow when we examine who it is that we want to be at the core of our being. Are we followers of Jesus? Do we claim that Jesus is not just a prophet,

or a good teacher, or a significant person in history, but that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God? It is very unlikely that you will encounter a group of French teenage girls questioning you about whose in charge of your life, but Jesus asks us, and the world looks to us for our answer... the answer to the question Jesus asks Peter: "Who do you say that I am? Everything else in life depends on your answer.