

2 Pentecost (B): The Feast of the Parish Picnic. June 3, 2018.

Welcome to the not real Feast of the Parish Picnic! Each year we end what we call the program year with the Sunday of the Parish Picnic, and ease or launch our way into summer with a party to celebrate what God has done among us in the previous nine months or so. And boy, what a program year it has been. Of course we've maintained the normal day to day indispensable work of being the church: praying and keeping the sacraments, deepening our faith and forming our children, feeding the hungry, baptizing new believers and praying through the death of friends, and trying to speak the truth in a culture that no longer rewards us for truthfulness.

But we have also done quite a lot of extraordinary church work over the last nine months. We built a new columbarium, which we will bless today. We helped form Ann Gaston for the diaconate and began our work in forming George Arceneaux for the priesthood. We increased the nights a month that our neighbors experiencing homelessness can sleep in our church by 200%. And of course with our friends at Unity Temple we provided sanctuary for a young refugee from Guatemala who now has legal status in the United States, has a job, and is receiving the medical treatment for cancer that we hope will save his life. Also, this has been a year when we have plain old gotten bigger—before the summer lull, we're currently seeing seventy percent more people here than we did three years ago.

Several of these extraordinary ministries or events by themselves would make for an interesting year. So I think that our collective church mood going into summer might be a kind of slightly tired triumphalism. A feeling like we might want to sing a karaoke version Queen's "We Are the Champions," but first we'll just take a quick powernap. And I think that in such a mood, our readings from scripture today have quite a lot to teach us.

First, like Samuel in our first reading, we are called to amazing things, perhaps things so wonderful that we may at first have a hard time recognizing what God is talking about. In this passage, Samuel is a boy serving as a kind of page to Eli, a sad and decadent chief priest. Samuel will become the leading prophet of a generation—he will interpret God's will to the whole nation of Israel, will anoint kings and tell them what to do and then depose them if they disobey. God is calling him to a ministry that will shape a nation—but at this point the best that young Samuel can imagine is some late night ministrations to a decaying religious elite.

We do this; we all do this and we do this collectively. We understand our assigned roles clearly, and we start interpreting everything according to the terms of that role. The most relevant danger to this is the possibility that our good roles can give us a kind of tunnel vision that prevents us from seeing the new work to which God may be calling us. We may not be called to be big heroes like Samuel, but together we are assuredly called to participate in the great divine work of reconciling the world to God.

Sometimes this great work goes very well, which makes it all the more important that we heed St. Paul's words: that we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants to others for Jesus' sake. We have been given great gifts and we're engaged in great work, but we hold these gifts and work in clay jars (or in the older translation, "earthen vessels"). These clay jars are, of course, us: ordinary enough, nothing too fancy, sometimes less beautiful than we'd like, sometimes more fragile than

we can stand. It's great if we can be awesome, but our awesomeness is not the point. God calls us to the work and God gives the growth and it is our great joy to participate in what God is up to. Despite our ordinariness and fragility, our doubts and mistakes. God is passionate about us and our well-being, but the work of Christian ministry is mostly about God reconciling the world to Godself and inviting us into that process.

It is first good news that it isn't all about us. But it is also sometimes a salutary warning, as I think we can see from today's gospel reading. I think the Sabbath isn't too far off from a church program or tradition. It is instituted for a very good reason—to give us the kind of regular standing help we need to maintain friendship with God. But the Pharisees have forgotten what Jesus knows: that the Sabbath isn't the point. The point is a relationship of faithful friendship with God that draws others into that friendship. The Sabbath is a tool to help us do that, and the Pharisees have become so committed to the tool that they have forgotten its purpose. We religious folks are *always* in danger of making this mistake, valuing what we do to the extent that we forget why we do it.

Now, I'm a little embarrassed, because I meant to give a sermon celebrating what these incredible last nine months have been like, and instead I've blathered on for some time about how we're not that awesome or if we are, it doesn't matter that much. (For the record, I do think that you are amazing.) But my real point is that this preemptive chastening is good news. We've had a great program year. But what all this is really all about is so much better than our programming. God is saving the world through the love revealed in Jesus Christ and we get to participate. This is always something to celebrate. Amen.