

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
September 28, 2014**

**16th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21A
The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**

Texts—Exodus 17: 1-7 and Matthew 21: 23-32

In this morning's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the Israelites and Moses where we left them last Sunday. Well, they actually had traveled a bit, maybe even a long way, from the wilderness of Sin where God answered their complaining with manna and quail, to Rephidim. Remember that grumbling? For the more appetizing food of Egypt? That desire that even overcame, for a moment, the recognition of their freedom from slavery? And here, they are still complaining, kvetching that there is no water to drink. It's a legitimate complaint. Certainly, they needed water, their children needed water, their animals needed it. Without water, they could die.

This time, Moses was concerned. They were blaming him. His leadership. He thought he was about to be stoned, they were so angry. They even questioned whether God was with them.

I can understand their anger, can't you? The excitement of escaping their slave masters and the Pharaoh, the drama of the parting of the Red Sea are long past. They have settled into the tedium of every day life, if you can call the exhaustion of setting up and taking down camp and traveling, day after day after day, "everyday life." Oh, sure, they had God's assurance of a Promised Land. But where was it? How long was it going to take? Traveling this wilderness path was hard! Really hard. Maybe more than they had bargained for. And this Moses guy? Who put him in charge? Is the Lord among us or not? Really?

Centuries later, the Pharisees are wondering about Jesus. Who put him in charge? Who gave him his authority? They test him. As usual, he doesn't give a direct answer. First, he throws a question back at them. What about John the Baptist's authority? Was his baptism from heaven or of human origin? When they can't answer, he tells them a story, a parable, about a father, two sons, and a vineyard. One son refuses his father's request to go to work but later has a change of heart and does it. The other son initially agrees, but then does not follow through. Who knows? Maybe he had every intention of obeying his father. But then, it was too hot, the work was too hard, he didn't have the strength or the stamina. It was not what he had expected.

Both of these stories—the journey in the wilderness and working in the vineyard—are like our lives of faith. Whether we are called to serve as ministers of the baptized or as ordained clergy, we do not know what we are getting into when we say "yes." We do not know where

that “yes” is likely to take us or how hard it might turn out to be. One thing is for sure—it is not just going out and doing the work, even doing “good works.” No. Any civic organization can do the same. This faith business is a way of life. It has a purpose beyond itself. And if we step into it, we are likely to be changed, aligned with what God wants for humanity in the ways we’ve been shown by Moses and John the Baptist and Jesus. The part that we do not anticipate is that we don’t simply go out to work, to receive a blessing, and go back to exactly where we were. We dwell in that vineyard. We are changed. We become part of bringing about the Kingdom of God.

This was true in the time of the Exodus, in the time of Jesus and then of Matthew’s community. It is true of the church in the 21st century.

I’m worried about this 21st century Church. I’m talking about the wider church—Episcopal and other mainline churches, especially. As you know, I was away for a week at a church conference in Alabama. What a wonderful, refreshing and renewing time it was! As time goes on, I’m sure I will be sharing more of that experience with you. But today, I am sharing an undercurrent of my time away that cast a shadow on the otherwise extraordinary week. The shadow of worry about the Church.

I’m sure it is not news to you that our churches have been declining for a number of years. The proportion of people who are not involved in church continues to climb—the unchurched, those disenchanted or wounded by the church, the “spiritual but not religious.” And this is affecting all churches, though the mainline has been hit hardest over the longest time. There have been many theories about how to stem and reverse the decline. You will remember that it was trendy a few years back to try to mimic the mega church model with its contemporary worship, praise music, power point, and entertainment. For the most part it didn’t work. You can’t be something you are not.

What I see happening now seems to be a general acceptance of the “fact” that as the decline continues, more and more of our churches will not be able to support educated clergy in the traditional way. As a result, the media and literature--from the New York Times to religious publications and news outlets--are becoming full of speculation and advice about alternative models of ministry. Now, that’s not all bad—it is healthy to always be assessing how we go about being church in the world. But my fear is that the church is just rolling over and playing dead in the face of this challenge. And this fear grew on me as I went through my CREDO week.

You see, the CREDO Conference I attended happened to be a pilot program for part-time

and bi-vocational clergy. That made sense. That's what I am. But then I realized that piloting such a program points to the growing sense that soon most of us will be part-time/bivocational. In some dioceses, those going through discernment right now are expected to have a Plan B for employment because they are going to need it to support themselves and their families. For most, a rector position with full pay and benefits will not be a reality. Or at least, that is the forecast.

There are several alternative models being tried and most were represented at my conference: 1) priests with day jobs who serve a church on weekends and whenever else they can fit it in; 2) total ministry teams consisting of a priest, deacons, and lay ministers that serve several churches; 3) sharing one priest among two or three churches, so each church has the priest and eucharist once or twice a month; and 4) local priests: individuals who are ordained without having completed seminary—a departure from the tradition of educated clergy.

At my conference, there were 20 participants. Eighteen were part-time and/or bivocational. Two of the 20 were vocational deacons, the rest priests. There was one man from Utah: a convenience store owner, mayor of his town for fourteen years, and priest. There was a woman who is a maritime chaplain and interim priest in New Hampshire; there were several others chaplains—in hospice, hospitals, Episcopal schools—who serve churches on weekends. The same was true of those who work in not-for-profits during the week. One other woman and myself were the closest to a traditional model—both of us half-time but with more flexibility for being available for pastoral needs, because our other obligations are secondary to the church. The one difference is that she is a vicar and her church is a mission. In her diocese, she cannot be a rector and the church cannot be a parish unless it can support a full-time priest.

Now, these people had a wide variety of work as priests and deacons. But these are the things they had in common: most worked 7 days a week (5 days at a job with benefits; 2 days at church). Their compensation from the church was very low and most were not getting contributions to the church pension. And they struggled constantly with scheduling and boundaries. The churches had to pick up the slack. If there was a medical crisis, someone would have to go to the hospital. But if it fell in working hours, it wouldn't be the priest. Funerals? Pastoral care? I think it must be a lot like Grace during that last year of the search when you had just a supply priest on Sundays. Except here, it is always that way.

I was alternately awed and appalled. Awed at the passion and commitment of these bi-vocational priests. Appalled at the exploitation by the church and the sense that this is just the way it is going to be—and that, apparently is all right. By the way, did I mention that 16 of the 20 participants were women?

You might wonder why I'm taking up this sermon time to talk about this now. After all, this is not our situation at Grace. Not today. Not next year or the year after or the year after that. But what about the next time a pastoral search must be done? The way things look, it is likely that the choices will be what I've described. Maybe if we talk about it now, think about it now, a spark will be lighted. Perhaps we will find another way and be part of a new thing.

And I wonder—why are our dioceses not putting energy into finding ways to resource churches and clergy in revitalizing? That's easier said than done, I guess. And I know that there have been such efforts in various places—some of our seminaries and dioceses are working hard at this. And there is a large re-imagining process going on now at the national level that is looking at things like re-structuring, becoming leaner, more nimble. And, yes, money is always an issue.

What I want to know, is this. By what authority is that work being done? Does it come from heaven or of human origin?

A bit of good news is that our Diocese of Chicago *is* doing something. That is what Thrive! is all about. It invites churches to look closely at themselves and dig deep beneath the surface beyond programs and the way things have always been. To go beyond our comfort and contentment to find what *can* be in this radically changing world. This is not about returning to some mythical “good old days.” The world has changed too much for that. It is about a new thing. About being awake and aware and courageous. Some churches need to travel a wilderness road. Others need to work in the vineyard, planting and cultivating. Pulling weeds. For both, it is finding a way of being and living, aligned with who God would have us be. Finding the living water. Harvesting new fruit.

God took Moses and the elders to the rock at Horeb. At His instruction, Moses took the staff—the very same staff he used to part the waters of the sea—and struck the rock. And out flowed the water. You see, God was—and is—among the people all along.

Amen.