

Sixth Sunday of Pentecost
The Rev. Patricia Millard

7-16-06

May the words of my mouth and the meditation in all of our hearts be acceptable unto you oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

I haven't been with you for a couple of weeks, I've been on vacation, and its very, very wonderful to see you again and be with you again. Of course I was here last week, and that was kind of special. In that vain of seeing people that we haven't seen for a while and are happy to welcome, Nancy and Margie it is just so good to see your faces amongst us. Let's give you a loving and welcoming hand.

This image of the plumb line, the reading out of Amos this morning, really was the reading that began my reflection as I prepared our message for our reflection. One of the things that it had me thinking about in a round-about way, was the way in which the architecture of our sacred space forms the way we understand ourselves as a Christian community and as people within the community. I remember that as a child I had this idea in my mind that our sacred space ought to be a place of comfort where you can go to run away from the noise and the heat and the bustle of the world and be in a quiet place, just you and God. I think many of us carry that sense of what our liturgical space ought to be.

That is certainly what I carried with me as I began formation as a Seminarian at ETSS in Austin. The Chapel in Austin is very different. From the first time I walked into it, and I know I've probably told you this story before; I was struck with how the full arrangement of that space was different from the way I tended to look at spaces. One wall is made out of limestone, the other wall is made out of glass in that way that the only architecture of the 20th century could make glass work. The walls aren't really parallel to each other, they're off kilter, and then there is this round kind of oval platform with the altar on it and the cross is not even inside the building. In fact, there are some places in that chapel where you can't see the cross. You sit there in this odd thing thinking that you ought to be able to see a cross and there's no cross to be seen. The reason you can't see the cross is that behind the altar there is a glass wall, similar to the way we have glass wall in our chapel. The cross is not inside but outside the building in back in the middle of the courtyard. That odd design is very intentional because it was in the mind of the people who designed the space that the formation of the community of Seminarians should be one that always pushed them to remember that we look to the Holy not contained inside of a sacred space as a source of comfort, out there in

the world; and that people who were being formed at ETSS in Austin needed to look for Jesus and involve themselves with the Holy not only inside of the Seminary but outside, in the Law School, on the UT campus. From that building you can see the Capitol and you can see the University of Texas. Or in those complicated neighborhoods that form the east and the south side of the city of Austin. That was a very important part of my formation while I was in Seminary.

In back of that building, in the side chapel, there was another part that was equally as formational but in a much more subtle way. It was a statue, an odd thing that we walked by several times without seeing. I certainly did not really look at it for the first couple of months I was there. It was made out of metal and as you looked at it you realized there was all this overlay of metal that was intended to evoke a whole complex of buildings. In fact it evoked a city and over that city, from the back, was this enormous thing that hung over the city. One day I looked at it and I realized, oh, it's a plumb line. Sure enough, I looked at the side and there was that quote out of the Book of Amos that we just read this morning: "I will set a plumb line amongst you." There it was; this image that was huge and frightening, this big plumb line that you compared to the building underneath it.

In the context of our reading this morning, that plumb line is definitely an image of judgment. If we were to take the time to unpack that story, this is very definitely a place in the narrative where Yahweh is standing in judgment over Israel. This stands as a precursor to what was eventually going to result in the fall of the northern kingdom. Remember that Israel for a long time had a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom and the northern kingdom was lost and much of our story then comes out of the southern kingdom that was Judea. So this is very definitely a reading of judgment and as such it does have that kind of ominous and frightening quality of this gigantic plumb line hanging over the city as if were going to fall and crash and crush. But nevertheless, when I think of these readings, I find myself wanting to still hold on to what that said, turning it around a little bit, because underneath this sense of the judgment of God over the community there is something much more interesting than judgment. What that is, is that God from the very, very beginning, from the first moment of creation and in all of God's story with God's people. This God had hopes and dreams for humanity. This God has hopes and dreams the way parents have hopes and dreams for their children. Or the way educators have hopes and dreams for their students; the way that any of us who have vocation or business or profession have hopes and dreams for the fruits of the work that we do. The image of that plumb line is less an image of judgment and more an image of reminder that always above our institutions, and especially above the institutions that would say that they are of God, hangs that

plumb line of the loving, good, hopes and dreams that God has for humanity and that God has for God's people.

That is a very useful image for us always, because whenever we gather institutionally, and God must have something of a love/hate relationship with institutions of any sort, but whenever we gather as an institution what needs to hang above us or within us as we look for our institutional identity is this plumb line of God's hopes and dreams for this part of humanity for this part of the world.

Now as we turn to St. Wilfrid's, I think that this is a very good and provocative image. It is an image that invites us to ask, to begin to ask, or to ask again, what are God's hopes, what are God's dreams, what is God's purpose, what is God's plan. What would God, out of the love of the heart of God, want for this community that is St. Wilfrid's, to embody, to continue to embody, to step into embodying? This is a question that I think is especially pertinent right now, because we know that we are a community in transition. One of the ways in which we are going to be intentional about walking through this time of transition in which we find ourselves, is exactly that. Pastor Michael, over the next few months with help from the Diocese and the Vestry, is going to lead us through a process of visioning. Underneath that process of visioning is this invitation: How do we as an institution, as a group, as a community step into embodying God's hopes and dreams for us today and in this place and in the days and years to come?

As we step into the New Testament I want to begin with a word of caution, because it is very easy, since God speaks so clearly to communities in the Old Testament, to create a dichotomy between the Old Testament about community or nation and the New Testament which is personal and to keep those things differently. There's a tendency to do that because the primary lens through which we see God's work in the New Testament is first of all Jesus. Jesus being a person invites us into a personal reflection, but I don't want us to think this is a dichotomy. Rather as more of an integration of our own personality into institutions. So as we step into the reading of the New Testament we have a very familiar Gospel and a Gospel that is a very empowering and exciting story. That moment in which Jesus calls the twelve back to Him and He empowers them and He sends them... this dynamic of calling, empowering, and sending out of the twelve. One thing that we might miss is that this dynamic in which Jesus begins to empower His Disciples to participate in His ministry comes at a very odd time in the ministry of Jesus because, in the Gospel of Mark, this is placed immediately after the Gospel we read last week. The story in which Jesus goes back to his home town and they act so hung up with: "Oh, didn't we know Him as a kid, He can't

possibly be doing or be anything that we don't expect". They give Him no authority so He is unable to do much work there. So there's this really poignant moment where Jesus the man finds Himself unempowered to do what He feels called to do, maybe amongst those who he loved best. Yet the first thing that He does after that is to turn to His community, and out of His experience of unempowerment, He does an internal transition to return as Himself. He nevertheless empowers those who follow Him as if to say that even in the face of opposition, God's grace is ultimately going to prevail and transform the world. If we think of Jesus as the primary paradigm of the embodiment of God's hopes and dreams, we can see in this story of the sending out of the twelve an invitation for us as individuals, to find our place in community so that we also can hear this calling and sending out of Jesus and take our place in this community that is going to embody what God hopes for us and what God dreams for us.

One story that I want to share with you here is the very communal nature of this work. Here, in my own life, one thing that I've really experienced over the last few weeks that was brought to me again, was how deeply we need each other. If you can imagine the last year, and especially the last 6 months, were really kind of difficult up here. We were supporting our Rector as he was moving through a process of discernment. We've had a lot of uncertainty as a staff as to where we were going, and before I left on vacation a few weeks ago, to be very truthful with you, I was really, really tired. I was tired of praying. I had prayed for this community so hard I had no prayers left. So I packed up the family and went to Oregon and we had a wonderful couple of weeks just roaming around Oregon. We went down the Columbia Gorge and into central Oregon, and I finally got my fill of lakes and rivers and trees and ocean, and it was very nice.

In the middle of this I realized that I had totally lost any capacity to pray. I started with In the Name of the Father, and the Son and dot, dot, dot, and I couldn't get any further and I thought well this isn't good. So I pulled out a Prayer Book and still it was dot, dot, dot, and it would stop, and I could not make myself pray. It just wouldn't happen. For a while I felt really guilty and then I said: "Well, I'm on vacation and I'm going to take a vacation from this as well." Then in the middle of this a friend asked me what was my spirituality? I said back: "God is just a blank dark wall and I stand in front of this blank wall and hope that I am in relationship with this blank wall." It was as if I had lost all of my ability to form prayers into words, and I let myself off the hook. Coming back here I was thinking about how I was going to return to this community and lead this community in prayer if I have no prayers myself. So this was in the back of my mind as I rejoined you last week. Then at the 8:45 and again at the 11:00 a very interesting

thing happened. In the very context of being with you, all those prayers came back and I realized that it was as if my ability to articulate prayers only exists when we are together. I got it towards the end of the last service. Of course; in order to understand God and in order to speak with God, we need our brothers and sisters. It is completely right, that when we step outside the community for a little while, that we find a difference in the way we experience the Holy because we experience the Holy so profoundly in the presence of each other. So I'm praying again because I'm with you.

Along those lines I share the story with you because its an invitation for us to think specifically about how do I as an individual find myself connected, empowered, called and sent, to be part of this community that is going to embody God's hopes and dreams. What I would like to do is give you three images of church that talk about specific areas that might be helpful for us right now as we answer that question.

The first one is that church is a community of meaning. There are all kinds of things out there that try to tell us what we are or what we aren't and they are very confusing. So we come to this place of community first and foremost to make sense of the meaning of it all. What is the story that will weave itself into my story so that I will understand who I am and what the world is all about? Knowing that we are beloved children of God, invited to be part of the embodiment of God's hopes and dreams, is a much better way to create meaning in our lives than to think that all we are is consumer units or that there is no meaning at all. It is an affirming thing to create that sense of story that puts us into the love and the plan of the Holy one. So we are first and foremost a community of meaning.

Very closely related is that we are a community of belonging because we know that we are by ourselves so isolated, so compartmentalized, so hurt. We know that we belong to a society that separates people and out there in the world we will be so alienated and so individualized and so compartmentalized. So we come to this place looking for belonging, we come looking for help for healing for support for community for relationship. We come bringing our hurts and our pain and we realize that it is in the presence of each other that those pains are shared or listed or transformed so that we can really move forward to be the kind of people that we would like to be. It is in this community that this sense of belonging that the whole transition happens.

So we have meaning, we have belonging, and finally we have empowerment. In the same way Jesus sent out the twelve, in the same way that Yahweh in the Old

Testament cared enough about this community to judge because God wanted that community first of all to embody His hopes and dreams. Well that same sense of calling, of sending, is an empowerment of a call that each one of us has to be this embodiment of the plan and the vision of God, the hopes, the dreams of God. One of the things that we do when we are together is that we empower each other to step into that. We commission people. We identify the gifts and the skills and the passions of people and connect those passions and skills with places of need in the world. We identify our own hopes, our own dreams, our own energies and put them to work in ways that are congruent with that thing we call God's plan and God's dream. Without empowerment and without working together, we can't be anything. But when we empower each other, when we connect with Jesus' calling and sending then we become a real presence of God's activity in the world.

So here we have meaning, belonging and empowering. As we head out this week I invite you to look at all three and see where they connect with your own story. Is there a story that you have not told? A wisdom that you need to share? Is it time to step up and talk about that story of the wisdom of the community? Well maybe God is calling you now to step up and tell that story, create meaning, add to the meaning of this community. Or perhaps, God is calling you to be a listener because there is not a telling of story without hearing of story and perhaps there are stories in this community that you need to hear and be told. Or, perhaps you are hurting and need to come to this community bringing the vulnerability of your own needs to experience within the community health and healing, and support and love. Or, perhaps God is calling you to identify a place amongst your brothers and sisters or community where that needs to be heard and received and God is calling you to pick up the phone, write a note, or be there for somebody else. In the sense of empowering, is there a stirring in your heart to do and be something. Is there a stirring in your heart into a new ministry, a new action or a new thing that empowers this community to be? Or is there conversely a call for you to empower somebody else, to move out of abundance and say we can bring people into this group, into this ministry so that we can do it better, and I can be a teacher or a facilitator or an empowerer so that someone else can grow.

So be it by meaning or belonging or empowering, the good news for us today is that over and over in the presence of Jesus, as people, as individuals, and as a community, we are always invited to participate and embody God's vision, God's hope and God's dream for our world.

Amen