

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost—Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 7, 2016

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

I have a friend who says that the Episcopal church has the best floor show in Christendom. We do tend to take seriously our procession, our choir, the color of the altar clothes, the organ—we like our worship to have a little polish, a little style. We have special robes, hats, candles, smoke and music. We are not above mixing a little bit of theater in with our devotions.

As you might imagine, this kind of complex liturgy takes many hands to make happen, and it takes quite a bit of advance planning. How should we start the service? What should we sing during the offertory? What prayers should we say during the Eucharist. These things don't just happen; there's a checklist.

It's easy to forget why we take time and energy to put into our worship service here. It's easy to forget that we craft our worship so that it molds us and moves our spirits toward God—not so that God can hear the prettiest songs. The shape of the rite is for our wayward spirits, not for God's faithful one.

We've tried to make the summer worship warm and reverent—a new song here, a new prayer there. These changes seldom come without controversy. We have been praying a prayer at the altar that, in Chicago, we affectionately call the Star Trek Prayer. You know which one I'm talking about. The priest tells the story of God creating the sun, the moon, the stars and the “planets in their courses” and then goes on to talk about this “fragile earth, our island home.” I'll confess that I have traditionally avoided this prayer at the altar, because it sounds a little funny to my ears. It has somewhat of a science fiction feel to it that didn't seem worshipful to me.

But in using it this summer, I've learned something. The important part of the prayer, the important part of the story, doesn't really have anything to do with the stars and the planets. Instead, the important part of the prayer comes later and serves as a petition from the people about to receive the bread and wine to God. It follows this way:

Lord God of our Fathers: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.

Each Sunday of this summer, we have prayed these words together; we've prayed for God to knit us together into one body, to create out of our separate spirits one spirit—all so that we might serve God in this world. If that's not a succinct representation of the Christian life, I don't know what is.

Christians, and Episcopal Christians, have some serious nerve, don't we? To go to God with our hands outstretched and to beg that God transform each and every one of us. And to expect that God will! No wonder people think Christians are a little crazy. We have the audacity to ask God to knit us together into one body—to perform a miracle right in front of us each Sunday.

And God's response? God says, "it will be my pleasure."

That's the word that stuck with me from this morning's Gospel: pleasure. Jesus says to his followers: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Think about that for a minute: "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Kingdom can mean all sorts of things: Reign of God; Dominion of God; Providential Time of God—however you want to call it. It simply means that in God's reign, we experience something quite different from the reign of the worldly powers. God's reign is justice, is mercy, is compassion. God's reign is care for the needy and solace for the bereaved. God's reign is the perfection of those things we seem to get so very wrong here on earth.

And Jesus says: don't be afraid; it is God's pleasure to give you the kingdom. God's pleasure. So, when we approach this Table with our bold prayer to be changed into the kingdom of God, God replies, "my pleasure." When, by all rights, God should probably respond, "are you crazy?" "you who can't get it together and form a just society?" "you, who harm each other and creation?" "You want Me to bless you?" "You're nuts." God says, instead, "my pleasure."

And so, because of God's grace and mercy, we are knit together into one people—regardless of age, gender, class, skin color—or any of those other reasons for division. It's not that these things aren't important. It's that they are never barriers to love of God and shouldn't be barriers to love of neighbor. God knits us together into a new body; into a new kingdom; into a new creation so that we might worthily serve the world in God's name.

So, yes: Episcopalians have the best floor show in all of Christianity—but not really for the reasons that we brag about. Yes, our choirs are the best. Yes, our sermons are the most eloquent. Yes, our vestments sparkle like none other. But none of that matters. What matters is that God shows up here and does something new and beautiful among us each week. God makes us brothers and sisters when we were strangers. God makes harmony where there was discord. God creates one when there were many.

That is they only reason we have to boast; we boast because God is good. We boast because God is love. We boast because God transforms us by God's good pleasure.

Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.

Amen.