

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for October 18, 2009
Proper 24b ~ Mark 10:35-45
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Some of you will recognize the name George Rupp. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister who holds degrees from Princeton, Yale, and Harvard. Currently, Dr. Rupp is head of the International Rescue Committee. Prior to that, he was president of Columbia University and, before that, he was president of Rice University in Houston. That is where I became acquainted with him. It was during his time in Houston that he published *Commitment and Community*, wherein he writes, "There is no life with out community and there is no community without commitment."

We are gathered today to celebrate the community we share in Trinity Episcopal Church and to answer a call to renew the commitment without which that community cannot thrive. Preachers have been told by church consultants not to talk about commitment to people in the pews because it frightens them. However, that's what we need to talk about today, so if you are feeling anxious, find someone close by to hold your hand.

One of the responsibilities of interims is to hold up a mirror for the community, to help folks take a close look at themselves, their identity, and the mission to which they are called. This Consecration Sunday sermon may do that for you.

Today is an opportunity to renew your commitment to the message entrusted to you. I want to suggest to you that the mission before you is not something you invented for yourselves and that it is not dependent upon your limited resources. If that's what you think it is, this sermon is not for you. If, on the other hand, you understand that the Creator and Ruler of the Universe has a job for you here in Lawrence, Kansas, showers the gifts you'll need to accomplish that mission, and expects you to be seriously committed, then you might want to stay with me.

I'm wondering: if tomorrow's *Lawrence Journal World* carried an article saying that Trinity Episcopal Church was closing its doors, what difference would it make? What, exactly, do you believe God wants to accomplish here in Lawrence specifically through the people who call themselves "Trinity Episcopal Church?" How does God want to deliver the message in a way only Trinity Episcopal Church can do it here and now? Do you think that your personal commitment to that message is strong enough to help deliver it? If everybody else in this community of faith were as committed as you are, would the message get across?

Today, you have an opportunity to make a new commitment to the message entrusted to you.

Today, is an opportunity to renew the commitment to live up to your potential. Trinity Church has a wonderful reputation in this city, spanning over 150 years. But whenever I think of reputations earned in the past, I always think of a song that was popular during my formative high school years. The song is "Today". The words & music are by Randy Sparks, a singer with the New Christy Minstrels. It appeared in the soundtrack of a motion picture, "Advance To The Rear", with Glenn

Ford and Stella Stevens and was also recorded by Jefferson Airplane and John Denver. The lines of that song that haunt me when I think of the accomplishments of the past:

I can't be contented with yesterday's glory
I can't live on promises winter to spring
Today is my moment, now is my story
I'll laugh and I'll cry and I'll sing

Potential is about today and tomorrow, not yesterday. If your job here is to rest upon the laurels of the generations that came before, then your mission will be to maintain this building as a monument to them and their community that mattered. That makes you the staff of a museum and your rector will be the curator, whose job is to maintain the status quo.

One of the things that will interfere with achieving potential is to make excuses for not doing the right thing. One of the most frequently heard excuses I've heard around the church for the last couple of years is that the church is struggling due to the economy. Before that, even during a robust economy, the excuse was that so many people were on a fixed income.

But when you look at the facts you realize that not everybody sees it that way. Did you realize that giving in the Episcopal Church has increased every year since 2003 until last year when it declined by 0.02%, an almost imperceptible decrease. Charitable giving in America declined last year in every category except religious organizations, where it rose 5.5%. Contributions to communities of faith account for over one-third of the \$300 billion in charitable giving in this country.

So, in spite of what you may have heard, people are still putting their churches first when it comes to giving. I believe it is because they understand that those communities sustain them in their spiritual journey. There is enormous potential for good in them and they don't want them to falter. They also know that other worthy causes can ask almost anybody to contribute, whereas churches have a very limited source for funding – each other.

Above all else, stewardship is about potential. Somewhere the notion crept in that stewardship is just about not spending money or saving money. That idea didn't come from Jesus. For Jesus, stewardship was about investing in what we believe in. And the notion that we don't have enough is foreign to the Bible. Even when God's people were slaves in Egypt or held in captivity in Babylon or under persecution under Roman rule, God is always portrayed as a bountiful God who pours out material and spiritual blessings in abundance. In fact, despite the challenges, the first Christians right after Pentecost were described as people of "glad and generous hearts."

The theology of scarcity is inconsistent with the biblical revelation. When we embrace it, it becomes an excuse for not pursuing God's mission and purpose. We fail the gospel when we allow frugality to be exalted to a doctrine on par with Jesus' example of lavish, generous, and prodigal giving. We can't achieve our potential as a church if we choose to live in the past, make excuses, and settle for a theology of scarcity.

Today is an opportunity to renew the commitment to be at your best in the new era that is emerging. A church isn't a great church until its people, with God's help, make it great. You have to give the best of yourselves. Are you giving the best of yourself to God? To God's Church?

You've been told that this campaign is not about the church's need to receive but about the giver's need to give. And that is very, very true. However, you can't escape the reality that when a community of Christ's people join hearts and hands in pursuit of something great, the Church blossoms and thrives.

Think about that as you consider the financial commitment you are asked to make today. Search your conscience. Ask yourself if you're living as if God called you to a place of privilege or to a place of responsibility. James and John thought the call to discipleship was a call to a privileged place in the new order...until Jesus pierced their hearts and opened their minds by telling them that the call to Christian discipleship is a call to responsibility – to be the servants of the world in order to change things – to redeem the place – to save peoples' lives – to make a real difference. It was a breakthrough for them when they understood that. The stewardship of their lives was permanently changed and when any one of us reaches that same breakthrough we are changed too. And the Church's mission in the world is always strengthened.

A lot of people who heard Jesus followed him for a while, then turned away. He asked too much. Half the time, he talked about possessions. His kingdom was some sort of counter culture movement. How can one be at one's best with a messiah like that?

Sometime next spring, your search committee will have attracted the attention of several priests whom they believe are qualified to be called as the next rector of Trinity Church. And those priests will be examining Trinity very closely to determine if this is the kind of community where their gifts might best be shared. When they do, you'll want to be at your best, won't you?

And, although there are many remarkable qualities that commend Trinity, you are not yet at your best. Despite an appeal, you ended last year with a deficit. Your vestry has projected a deficit for this year as well. If you were here last week, you recorded the figures Bob Sanner gave you regarding the congregation's giving patterns. If you did the math, by now you realize that we have no record of any contribution from 21% of our households for the last 12 months. Another 21% gave less than \$5 per week. One-half of one percent gave at the level that would be considered at or above a tithe given the average household income of Lawrence, Kansas.

You are counting on the search committee and the vestry to represent you and call the right person, but they can't do it alone. You have to be the community they say you are and I believe you want them to be able to portray you at your best, a people of "glad and generous hearts." You don't want to convey the impression that you are waiting for a new rector to erase deficits or fill pews or deliver the mission and the message for you. You, my brothers and sisters, hold the key to those things and if you demonstrate your willingness to address them, God will do greater things with you than ever before! The new rector may be truly remarkable and able to walk on water without assistance and without benefit of a life preserver. However, we priests are not ordained to be one person shows. We are ordained to equip and empower you in your ministries. You want an above average rector,

someone who is extraordinary. Remember that those who are being considered are also considering whether or not you are an above average, extraordinary community of faith!

There's a striking epitaph in an old church in England. Long ago, a cavalier soldier sold his property and gave a great deal of money to the royalist cause. Then he was killed in a battle with the Round Heads. When his friends buried him, they carved this message on his tombstone for the centuries to read: "He served his King Charles with a constant, dangerous, and expensive loyalty."

Do you want to do your share in making the most of this community of faith, Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas? Of course you do. But if this church is to be great, you will have to rise to this occasion and make the commitment that is necessary. Today, I challenge you to serve God with a "constant, dangerous, and expensive loyalty."