

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for May 13, 2012 ~ Easter 6B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. – John 15:16-17

A usually grumpy parishioner is said to have hugged the rector after church one Sunday morning. “I’m so glad you preached an historical sermon,” she said. The rector, shocked by this unusual praise beamed thanks. The parishioner continued, “Yes, because I am sick and tired of hearing about love all the time.”

If it seems that you’ve been hearing about love quite a bit during this Easter season, that’s because you have. You are not imagining it. Our readings since the Second Sunday of Easter, particularly those from the First Letter of John, contain some important and powerful material about God’s love for us and our love for one another. And, since these texts tell us that Jesus has commanded us to love so that our joy may be complete, the theme of love is pretty hard for a preacher to avoid.

And consider the Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter:

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

That makes it even more difficult to avoid preaching another sermon about love. So, today’s sermon, like the last several, will be about love. And, today, we’re going to consider how love, Love Divine, makes it possible for us to be a fruitful congregation through risk-taking service and mission.

In the book we are studying during the Great Fifty Days of Easter, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase writes,

Mission and Service refers to the projects, efforts, and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever become part of the community of faith. *Risk-taking* pushes us out of our comfort zone, stretching us beyond service to people we already know, exposing us to people, situations, and needs that we would never ordinarily encounter apart from our deliberate intention to serve Christ. Congregations who practice Risk-taking Mission and Service offer endless opportunities for people to make a difference in lives of others through service projects, [involvement] opportunities, and mission initiatives.

Last Thursday evening, I attended a ribbon cutting at the new home of the Ashland Community Kitchen. During the ceremony, we were shown a plaque that will be placed on the wall of the dining

area there. It reads, “In grateful appreciation to Calvary Episcopal Church for 29 years of hospitality to the Ashland Community Kitchen and in recognition of their commitment to serving others in the name of Jesus Christ, this 10th day of May 2012.”

Here’s what I know about the Ashland Community Kitchen at Calvary Episcopal Church.

- In the beginning, many members were personally involved in the day-to-day operation of the community kitchen. Through the years, as the community kitchen hired personnel to operate the kitchen to serve the hundreds of people it served, the need for unpaid help decreased.
- Even though Calvary’s vital contribution became making these facilities available and even though the “hands on” involvement of members was minimal, Calvary was known on the community grapevine as “the church where the community kitchen is.”
- At the beginning of this year, the community kitchen relocated to a larger facility in the social services pavilion south of here. One result of the move is that it freed up the parish hall for uses that were not possible for almost three decades. Another result of the move is that Calvary is now known on the community grapevine as “the church where the community kitchen *used* to be.”
- Since my arrival almost three months ago, people have been telling me, “Now that the community kitchen is gone, we must develop programs that make use of the parish hall and we must find other ways to reach out in service to the community.”

So, the success of a risk-taking mission you helped establish and sustained for 29 years has now presented you with a new set of challenges: What to do with a fine parish hall and kitchen, and how to serve the neighbors in the community in which God has placed us.

How you begin to respond to these two challenges will make a critical difference in the life of the parish for decades to come. A faithful response will require risk-taking and that’s a scary proposition in a culture that is in many ways risk-averse. If your response and your risk-taking are borne of Love Divine and if God gets the glory, you will be fruitful and there will be plenty of joy to go around.

The collect of the day and the readings from the epistle and the gospel prompt this question: Does what God has prepared for those who love God involve risk-taking service and mission as well as eternal glory?

In a few minutes we are going to renew our Baptismal vows as Ava Jolee Lambert comes to the waters of Baptism. We, the Baptizers, are going to once again declare the faith we embrace and we are going to promise to help her grow to know the joys of that faith as well. When we read the promises we make, you will notice that most of them have to do with how we live out the implications of our Baptism, not just as individuals but as a community of believers. We are promising to live our lives in alignment with what we say we believe so that Ava and people beyond the walls of this building will see the fruit and know that we truly are Christ’s disciples.

Here’s where we are going to begin a response. This is not the entire response. It’s just the beginning.

Well over half the students in our Ashland public schools are on the free or reduced meals program. That means they receive breakfast and lunch each school day during the academic year. This federal

program exists because every study shows that hungry children do not learn and develop intellectually as well as those who have enough food.

But what about weekends during the school year? If there isn't enough food at home on school days and during the summer, why would we think there's enough on weekends? In fact, we know that these school children often have very little to eat between Friday noon and Monday morning. With the blessing of the vestry, Deacon Diane Zwick and Craig Clere have been working on a plan that will give Calvary a way to do something to help.

There are several different programs that provide weekend meals for school children. One of them is headquartered in Louisville. It is called Blessings in a Backpack. Currently churches and other organizations in partnership with Blessings in a Backpack are feeding over 58,000 children in the U.S. and in Canada. A relatively small number of people gather in the middle of every week to assemble packs of food procured from a local grocer. Those packs are delivered to schools on Thursdays so that school personnel can send it home with needy students on Friday. It costs only \$85 to feed one child every weekend during the school year - \$10 per month. Ten to twelve committed people can prepare enough packs to feed up to 100 children.

Craig and Deacon Diane have signed us up with Blessings in a Backpack. They've recruited several people to help and the door is wide open for others to join this effort, starting at the beginning of the next school year. School Superintendent Steve Gilmore and his staff are ready to line us up with a school.

Starting next week, you'll see a chart in the hall where you can make a pledge to provide funds to feed one or more children. On the chart beside it, you will be able to indicate how often you will come for 30 minutes on Wednesday evenings to join in the joy of packaging the food that will bring joy to hungry children. We'll also need some of you to pick up the food at a local store and bring it to the church on a dependable schedule. And, we'll need a couple of people to deliver the food to the school or schools on Thursdays.

And here's an extra-added piece of information. We'll be the first church in Ashland to do this. But because of the example Calvary sets, we won't be the last! In eight months time, Calvary will go from being known as the church where the community kitchen used to be to the church that brought Blessings in a Backpack to Ashland to feed hungry children on weekends.

Moreover, at this time, there is only one other Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Lexington that is engaged in a weekend meals ministry for school children. Our two congregations can help every other congregation in the diocese find a way to do the same thing in their communities. Children will be better fed and God will receive glory because those children will know by whom their weekend meals are provided.

I personally believe this is one of the "good things God has prepared for those who love him." When we roll up our sleeves and get started in this ministry, we will soon understand the rest of today's collect, in which we ask, "Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire."

When I was telling Ava about the meaning of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, I explained that the word sacrament means “sacred promise” and in our Church we understand that Baptism is something we do that is more than words to tell us about God’s promises to us. A little later in the conversation, I asked her if she understood why we don’t need to be Baptized more than once. She answered, “Because God never breaks promises.”

So, Ava, you’ve helped me preach this sermon about love today by reminding us that God never breaks promises. We must never hold back when presented with the opportunity for risk-taking service and mission, for if it flows from love for God and love for our neighbors, we will the promises of God to rely on. And, God never breaks promises.