

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for September 8, 2013 ~ Proper 18C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In 1821, leaders of The Episcopal Church formed an organization known as The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. In 1835, the membership of the society was expanded to include all Episcopalians. Our present *Constitution and Canons* states, “This organization shall be called The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and shall be considered as comprehending all persons who are members of the Church” (Title I, Canon 3, Article I). Therefore, if you are a member of the Episcopal Church, you are a missionary. When you attend worship or a meeting in an Episcopal Church, you are attending a gathering of the missionary society. When you contribute to an Episcopal Church, you are participating in missionary efforts at home and abroad.

Prof. Powell Mills Dawley, in his text on Church history, explains the inspiration behind including every member of the Episcopal Church in the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society:

At first the Society...was an organization of Church leaders and interested members, but in 1835 a momentous decision was made. Membership in the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society was extended to every Episcopalian on the sound principle that at baptism a Christian becomes a responsible member of the Church’s mission. Every Christian who is true to his or her faith is in some way a missionary.

Imagine that! Each of us is a missionary from Baptism onward. What are we doing with that knowledge? If we are self-conscious about our missionary identity, how are we advancing the Gospel?

At 9:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings for the next several months, we will be offering an adult formation called “The Episcopal Church in One Year.” In that forum, we will explore many aspects of our life and practices as Episcopalians. But underneath all of it, we will be seeking to understand how those things help us to be missionaries in a missionary Church. This is a wonderful opportunity for each of us to come to terms with the implications of our missionary identity and to make certain that our spiritual foundations are in place so that we can be very intentional about the missionary purposes Episcopalians are called to pursue. And what are those missionary purposes?

In search of an answer to that question for myself, I turned to the Catechism, which you, too, may find in the Book of Common Prayer (page 855). Our catechism, like those of other churches, is a question and answer drill. Here is what it says about the missionary purposes of the Church:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

Jesus said, “you are my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Well, here we are at the ends of the earth. 88 years ago, Christ Church Cranbrook became a parish of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Michigan. 85 years ago, The Rt. Rev. Herman Page, Bishop of Michigan, led a congregation of people in the consecration of this magnificent edifice. Today, we love to hear the story of the founders and of the building of this edifice. Some of you have been listening to it all your life. It is a remarkable story. Certainly, when we consider the complexities and the costs of the missionary work during those early days in comparison with the difficulties of our own time, we must realize how really easy we have it. Nevertheless, we have obstacles of our own to overcome. And among those obstacles is the tendency to forget who we are and why we are here. It is easy to take it all for granted and to lean on their accomplishments. A bishop I once knew used the analogy of pulling into a space where there is a parking meter with a little time left on it. He called it, “parking on another person’s quarter.” I daresay few of us gets out of bed in the morning and thinks, “I’m going out to be one of God’s missionaries today.” But if we are going to rise to the occasion, continue the good work that God has begun here, and reach our potential, we are going to have to do exactly that.

This parish and the entire Episcopal Church are in the midst of what I believe to be a watershed era of cultural change. Whatever the cultural changes that are occurring globally, I believe God is calling us to make some particular kind of cultural changes inside the Church so that we will be able to respond to the needs of the world around us. It is God’s desire to mold and shape us as the potter shapes the clay. I don’t believe Christians are ever put in the oven and fired and glazed. God needs us to remain pliable so we can be changed by the divine touch.

Christ Church Cranbrook has been given the opportunity to make intentional and purposeful changes in the culture of spiritual formation, the culture of involvement, the culture of service, and the culture of giving. It is, in many ways, a time of spiritual awakening in which our attention must be drawn to ways in which our words and actions are brought into authentic alignment with the mission of Christ. We have been called the generation that forgot God. That should serve as a wake up call and a summons for us to pay the personal price that is necessary so that description will not be our generation’s legacy. This parish has long been known as the *largest* Episcopal Church in Michigan. It was the vision of the founders that it might be the *leading* Episcopal Church in Michigan, lighting the way for others. I believe it is this generation’s destiny to bring that vision into reality.

When we encounter Jesus in today’s gospel, he is being followed by a large crowd. When he notices them, he turns to them, takes off his kid gloves, and tells them what truly following him means. He does not mince words. Honestly, this passage is one of the hardest of Jesus’ sayings. I am not as courageous as Jesus, but I need to speak to you out of love and hope about the implications of his words for our lives. So, as your spiritual leader during this time of transition, how am I supposed to get us all on that page? How shall I challenge each of you to become a self-conscious missionary in this mission field? How will I help each of you take up your cross and follow Christ?

I have served in thirteen congregations and have been placed in charge of eight of them. I have discovered enormous faith among the people of every one of those communities of faith. Each of them has in its own way found a level of passion for being a missionary people. But I must tell you, never before have I served among a people with greater potential or in a region that is more in need of what that people have to offer, than Christ Church Cranbrook. God has stirred the heart of this church for more years and God is stirring more vigorously today than ever before. We have a wonderful heritage. But I invite you today to believe with me that the best days of this church lie before us, not behind us.

There is a mission field at our doorstep. Since shortly after my arrival here, I have asked the ushers to open the doors of the church during the closing hymn and I have invited the worshipers to turn and face that world into which we are being sent as missionaries. For, you see, if the Gospel of Christ is going to reach that world, it is going to have to be taken there by Christ's missionaries. That is our purpose. Here we receive so there we can give. Here we are inspired so that there our lives can be an inspiration to others. Here we are fed so there we may feed. Here we are blessed so there we may be a blessing.

And, as a further reinforcement, I am going to give you a daily reminder. The next time you look into the mirror, remember that the person you see there is a member of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. The person looking back at you is a missionary. That Missionary in the Mirror is called to do three things: *First, work for the spread of the kingdom of God.* Think of one thing you will do each day that will help spread the Gospel of Christ. *Second, pray for the spread of the kingdom of God.* Pray for someone you know who does not have a spiritual home! Pray for those who need the words and the works of the Gospel of Christ. Pray for your sisters and brothers in Christ Church Cranbrook. *Finally, give for the spread of the kingdom of God.* Step up in generosity, believing that every step counts. Christian stewardship is a lifestyle in which we return to God a portion of what God has entrusted to us mindful that everything we have, whether spent, saved, or given away is a sacred trust from God. It is love responding to Love!

One meaning of the parable of the tower, recorded in today's Gospel, is that we should be sure that we have what it takes to be disciples of Jesus Christ – his missionaries. The deeper meaning of the parable, for me, is that *on my own* I will never have enough of what it takes. When God calls us to undertake a task or a mission, it is God who will supply the resources. We have to believe that God's supplies are more than sufficient. Being a missionary is not the mustering of our own resources so that we can have what is needed, but rather accepting from God whatever is needed to invest in each new situation and relationship. And our God is a bountiful God who blesses those who count on him with an abundance of whatever is necessary to live the life God calls us to live and become the people God designed us to be – to fulfill our missionary purpose.

Go ahead, count the cost. What will it cost you daily to take up your cross – to work, to pray, and to give for the spread of the kingdom of God? I challenge you in the Name of Christ to give it a try for one year and see what happens in your life, the life you share with your family, neighbors, and colleagues, and in the life of your church. We'll want to hear the stories you will have to share and I hope we can share them with one another.

Work, pray, give. It may not be easy. But then, cross bearing never is. Jesuit Daniel Berrigan, put it this way, "If you follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood."