

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Year C
August 26, 2007
The Reverend Anne B. Bonnyman

“I Am Laying In Zion A Foundation Stone”

Good morning. It is great to be back at the Church of the Ascension. I want to thank your vestry, your priest-in-charge and the parish staff, and the anniversary committee for this invitation. It is a blessing to be part of your 50th anniversary celebration.

Fifty years ago, I sat across the street on Northshore Drive, in a brand new classroom at Sacred Heart School. The desks were shiny and the paint was fresh. Double grades were combined in single classrooms as the new school opened its doors. I was always a day dreamer as a little girl, and I loved to gaze out the window at the lush green hillside across the street. The trees were beautiful and much more appealing than multiplication tables. Soon I saw construction trucks wind their way up the hill and realized that something big was going on over there. In time I would see that it was a church. A beautiful church with graceful arches was being built at 800 Northshore Drive.

I am reminded of God's words to Isaiah in today's lesson: See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic."

From a distance I witnessed the Church of the Ascension's foundation being laid. After several decades and life lived in other cities, I made my way across the street and I found a home. I came here as a seminarian, and then a deacon and was ordained priest, and years later I returned as Interim Rector. I have gone on to serve in Delaware and Massachusetts, but Ascension has been my foundation stone, my home base in the Church. Thank you for welcoming me home for your anniversary.

A fiftieth anniversary is a big milestone, an opportunity for reflection. You already have a rich history and plenty of evidence that God is in your midst. Like all churches, this one has known fat times and lean times and will undoubtedly experience both again. I have learned to appreciate how churches season over time and am reminded of the birthday collect in the BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER. It begins, O God, our times are in your hand.

My current parish is 274 years old. I have been reading about the new building program which took place there in 1873. While Trinity Church today is an historic landmark, it was literally on the cutting edge of Boston when it was constructed on new landfill in the harbor. Risks were taken and a new vision was crafted, much like what has happened here

at the Church of the Ascension over the years. Now that you are warmed up, I know that you are thinking and praying about Ascension's next 50 years. Someone will be sitting in these pews 50 years from now thanking you, just as you thank your forbears today. O God, our times are in your hand.

As new generations take their place in the life of the church, each must also learn to read the Bible and understand its message in a new setting. You can see this happening already in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. It can also be found throughout church history when people were paying attention. The challenge to discover God's truth in contemporary life is a source of renewal for us, even if it feels messy. It works most of the time, not because we get it right, but because our questions and stumbling around ultimately open our hearts and minds to God. And sometimes the questions themselves are merely shadows that point to God's deeper truths.

Our gospel lesson today begins with a question. In fact it is a question that is so basic to human society that I was learning it on the playground across the street 50 years ago. Who gets to be in and who is left out? Or, as the text says, Lord will only a few be saved? Jesus had been teaching about the Kingdom of God and the inquirer assumed that only the special few will be invited into that Kingdom. See how Jesus plays along with this assumption and agrees that indeed there will be judgment. But the judging will not be based on traditional divisions and social codes. It will not begin with religious and ethnic distinctions or any other categories that we can dream up. No, there is a whole new criteria for admission. The Kingdom is for those who seek God. The door may be narrow, but it opens wide to those who long for a relationship with God. In fact, hunger is what the Kingdom is all about. Jesus describes it as a feast, a banquet, where there are always more than enough reserved seats. The Kingdom is where God's dreams for creation all come true and there is abundance for everyone.

While a holy meal had long been a part of Jesus' religious tradition, he takes it to a new level to describe God's dream. This Kingdom is abundant and generous rather than exclusive. However, it does require a response. It is not enough to be an observer. Jesus tells a parable in which folks in the street expect special privileges from a homeowner because they are simply hanging out nearby. We ate and drank with you and you taught in the street, they whine, but the man doesn't recognize them. I do not know where you come from, he says. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus teaches, proximity is no substitute for a relationship. You can't just breathe the fumes from outside the door and be part of God's Kingdom. Come on in and take the place that has been set for you. Are you looking for a deeper relationship with God? Are you looking for any kind of relationship with God? You are already moving into the Kingdom.

One of our challenges today is to understand how many ways a relationship with God can be manifest and to live with ambiguity when others' relationships look very different from our own. We see this at the local and national level with our competing claims about God's standards. It is also a dominant issue on the global level. Faithful people claim to follow God in different and often opposing ways, whether in churches, mosques, synagogues, temples or shrines. This is a new challenge that is different from those our founders here experienced in 1957. Last Sunday's New York Times Magazine addressed the issue of global religious differences in a cover article which I commend to you. While it takes a historical approach, the author, Mark Lilla, concludes that each tradition is best served by looking within to find compelling theological reasons for accepting new ways as authentic reinterpretations of the faith.

This is exactly how Jesus taught! Long before the New York Times, this is how Jesus taught, lifting up the wisdom of the scriptures to shed light on a new day. New wine has to go in new wineskins, he said. God is doing a new thing, building a kingdom not of this world but within this world and it begins now, with a banquet. The only entrance requirement is your spiritual hunger.

Jesus raised the stakes when he claims that people from all over the world are invited through the narrow door into the Kingdom. In his setting where it was taboo to dine with women or people with different religious beliefs, let alone foreigners, Jesus shocked them all. He promised that people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

That could have been written yesterday, couldn't it? Now people from east and west and north and south increasingly live and love and make war side by side. Now more than ever, Jesus' vision of a Kingdom which nourishes all of us is compelling. I have just finished reading Sarah Miles' new book, entitled TAKE THIS BREAD. It is a professional writer's account of her recent conversion to Christianity through her local Episcopal Church. I especially like her description of the Kingdom of God as the same old earth, populated by the same clueless humans, transformed wherever you could glimpse God shining through it...we were all thrown in together - a makeshift community so much bigger and more contradictory than any of us would have chosen. But each of us had come just as were to this Table....where we'd heard miracles might happen.

For fifty years now, men and women and children have been drawn to this table at the Church of the Ascension. At times it has been an unlikely crowd, a makeshift community so much bigger and more contradictory than any of us would have chosen. And yet, over these decades God has always shone through and miracles continue to happen here. The Kingdom of God is here, as Christ promises, and all you have to bring to this table is your hunger.

O God, our times are in your hand.

May God bless each of you and this church as you continue to seek and build the Kingdom here. Never underestimate God's abundance in your midst as you follow Christ boldly in this new day. Ask all the questions, listen for the unexpected answer, and when in doubt, err on the side of generosity. It is the currency of the Kingdom and God's great gift to all of us. May God bless you and keep you in the next 50 years and all the days to come.

AMEN