

“Pass It On!”

- I. **Introduction: Pass It On.** Faith and this football are similar in two very important ways. You have to get ahold of them both to do anything with them, and you have to pass them on if you want to see some action. When I was a young boy growing up next to the Atlantic Ocean, we used to go down to the beach and play touch football. If you could have watched us, you would have seen one of us holding onto the ball (like this) and getting ready to pass it on to someone else, while scanning the beach to see who on our team was “open.” Meanwhile, team-mates would yell, “I’m open, pass it over here, pass it to me.” The person with the ball needed to pass it as quickly as possible in order not to lose it and to get closer to the goal and score. To keep the game moving, you had to pass that ball on.

- II. **Our Faith Is Just Like That.** First, just like with this football, we need to get ahold of our faith. And we cannot do that by only watching other people throw the ball. First, we need to take hold of the ball ourselves and get to know it well. I went to an Episcopal Seminary that was a part of the Yale Divinity School. In some of my classes I was with theology students from many denominations. I both went into and came out of seminary as an Episcopalian, but in between I learned much about our rich and diverse Anglican tradition. One day we were in Christian Ethics, and I remember my professor saying, “Know your faith traditions. If you are a Methodist,” which my professor was, “be the very best Methodist you can be. If you are an Episcopalian, be the very best Episcopalian you can be. Know about the theology of Richard Hooker, a brilliant early Anglican theologian; understand sacramental theology and be able to explain to others what you do in your liturgy.” I understand my professor’s wisdom better now than I did then. Recently, out of the blue, someone who was thinking of visiting our church asked my wife Peg, “What do you believe in the Episcopal Church?” When we share our faith, we need to know not only about the Christian faith, but also why we do what we do in the Episcopal Church. For example, why do we have a Liturgy of the Word and then Holy Communion each week? How do we understand the sacrament of the Eucharist? What does it mean that in the Eucharist together we experience the mystical presence of Jesus Christ in the bread and the wine?

- III. But getting our hands around our faith isn't enough. It's the first step. Then we have to pass it on. I've said before and strongly believe that if as Christians come together in a church but do not grab hold of our faith and then try to pass it on, we are going to see our church die. We cannot keep the Christian faith alive clutched in our own hands. The more we try to hang onto it, the more likely we are to lose it.

We have a good example of this in today's gospel. Earlier in the first chapter of John, Jesus had walked by John the Baptist two days in a row. Both times John had proclaimed "Behold, the Lamb of God." As a result of John's endorsement of Jesus, two of his disciples, including the Apostle Andrew, left the Baptist and become followers of Jesus. This was not good news for the Baptist – as he lost followers he became increasingly vulnerable to arrest by the authorities. It was in John's personal interest to have as many followers as he could. But he passed the ball – his mission and his disciples – on to Jesus. He passed it on.

Just several verses later Andrew sought out his brother Peter and told him that they had found the Messiah. Andrew did not keep Jesus for himself. Peter became a follower as well. He also passed it on. The same thing happened again a few verses later. Jesus called Philip to follow him. And then Philip went to find Nathaniel and invited him to also follow Jesus. After a bit of a struggle, Nathaniel did just that. Philip had passed it on. That's the model Christ gave them. That's the method used by the early Christian Church, and they grew exponentially. That's the model Christ gives us. It is known as the Great Commission. And that is the approach we are called to use here at Church of the Ascension. We are called to pass it on.

- IV. In order to pass it on, we need a plan, and we need to back up that plan with action. Are you familiar with the film "Pay It Forward"? In this movie a young boy Trevor lives in a tough, violence-filled home. In spite of his troubles, Trevor starts a project in his Jr. High Social Studies class called "paying it forward." In the project you do a favor, a kindness, to someone else that really helps them; then you ask them not to pay the favor back to you, but rather to pay it forward to three other people, who in turn do the same thing for three others. You can see how the geometric effect can work very quickly to multiply the kindness. If we apply the same approach to our "paying it forward" as Christians, what might happen? If each of us here this morning got hold of what Jesus Christ has done for us, really got our hands around how much love Christ has shown us and how much Christ wants us to pass that along to others, how many others could experience that love as well!

In recent months, through the inclusion of a set of questions about the Great Commission in our self-study survey, the creation of the Great Commission Commission of the Vestry, and the recruitment of Fr. Rob Travis to provide leadership and guidance to our Great Commission efforts, we have been preparing to become increasingly

intentional in passing on our faith. At the very heart of these efforts is our determination to strengthen our ability to take our faith and boldly pass it along to others in the very best way we can. Here are two suggestions about how we can pass it on right now:

- A. One way to pass it on is to invite others to our worship services. A tremendous amount of effort is put into the music, the sermon, the liturgy, and preparation of the sanctuary for worship. Invite others to join us, bring them with you, continue to enthusiastically greet visitors when they come, and extend yourselves to them after the service. In addition, when you come into the sanctuary for a service, take a few moments to pray and ask God to prepare you and all of us for the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship. Then ask God to bring those people to Ascension who need a faith community where they can find love, challenge, openness, and hope. Ask God to help us pass it on.
- B. A second concrete step is that you could share with someone else – a neighbor or a friend, for example -- a new DVD with a brief but compelling description of who we are at Church of the Ascension and the direction our church is taking. This DVD was made by one of our parishioners, Stephen Land, who owns Jupiter Entertainment. The Diocese approached us about making such a DVD that will be shown at our next Diocesan Convention. It highlights the process of rejuvenation that has taken place here. Many of you have seen this DVD and it is running continuously in the foyer area this morning. We now send copies of this DVD to visitors with our welcome letter. If you would be interested in passing on a copy of this DVD to a friend or neighbor, please sign the list in the foyer, and a copy will be made for you.
- V. Conclusion. There are Many Ways to Pass It On: We, like John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel know the Messiah and have opportunities to introduce others to him. If our faith is really meaningful to us and we understand its value to others, then we will want to pass it on. Our faith grows as we pass it on and as we see God at work in the lives of others. We've got the ball in our hands. Will you join me in passing it on?