

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
August 9, 2009
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“Coming Back Into The Picture”

1 Kings 19:4-8, Psalm 34:1-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35,41-51

As I was driving this week along Kingston Pike I noticed our new sign at the corner of Northshore, perhaps you've seen it - You have no doubt seen the old sign style in towns throughout the country. The text on it says, “The Episcopal Church welcomes you,” but on the old style sign the Shield, that English-style coat of arms with the red cross in the middle, and the blue field with white crosses in the upper left corner.

On the old sign that shield was right in the center of the sign. The new sign, which we have on our corner of Kingston Pike, has that shield partially in view from the upper right corner. It is as if it is a person peeking into the sign. It struck me when I saw it this time, that there are a couple of possibilities for what this means. And these were in my own imagination, having nothing to do with the intentions of the designers of the sign.

I thought, with all that is going on in our world today, and with the startling decline of the Episcopal Church over the past few decades, it seems that the Episcopal Church is fading from view, it is leaving the stage of relevance and becoming more and more marginalized in the field of the American Christian life. The way the shield was placed on the sign seemed to me as if it was departing from view. And that made me sad.

But when I think about the Church of the Ascension, thank God, that is not what I see at all. Instead, as we have gone through enough crises over the past couple of decades, to do any number of average churches in, and rebounded each time to new strength, we are not fading from view. This time, with the new life we are experiencing, and the excitement with our mission in the world around us, we are coming back, in a big way.

When I thought about the Ascension, I realized that for us, the Episcopal Shield is coming back into the picture. We are becoming more and more relevant, even as the greater church seems to becoming less and less. Why is that? I think a good deal of it has to do with our engagement with mission work.

Our scripture readings today are all about God's providence. What does God provide for us? In 1st Kings Elijah is at the end of his rope, willing to give up his life, and everything.

But God gives him rest, and then provides food and drink, to build up his strength. Through his Angel God even asks Elijah to eat and drink again, so the journey will not be too much for him. God takes care of his very human needs, understanding exactly what those needs mean, and not diminishing them in any way.

The psalm talks about our emotional needs, and how the Lord delivers us from terror, recognizing that we cannot live in Fear, and experience the abundant life he intends for each of us. By paying attention to God in our lives, we become radiant, and lose the shame, that hinders us from living in freedom.

In Ephesians Paul reminds us that we are members of one another, and that we should honor each other with dignity in our dealings, speaking the truth, but putting away bitterness, and wrath, and slander, and being kind and tenderhearted. This is all in the interest of being imitators of God. There is no greater challenge in our life, than to imitate God, who gave himself up for us, and forgives us in spite of our continuous wrongs.

These scriptures remind us that the spiritual life, is not divorced from the physical, emotional and mental life. It is intertwined, and our experience of God depends very much on our human experiences. So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," He is referring to providing for our most essential needs.

Someone I read said of this passage, that if Jesus were talking to a Japanese person, He would say "I am the rice of life." for to a Japanese person rice is the staple food, that is present at every meal. One can eat and eat the other things, but unless one has rice, they would not feel satisfied. Bread is like that for the people Jesus is talking to.

Whatever it is for us today Jesus is saying, I provide what you need to be satisfied with life. For Christians the experience of God is a tangible thing, we are asked not just to think about God, but to "Taste and See that the Lord is Good." So what does this have to do with Ascension and our Episcopal image coming back into the picture? Well remember, Paul challenges us to be imitators of God. And the mission work we do at Ascension is about providing for people's most basic needs. The Family Promise, Fish Food Pantry, Our developing mission relationships with Bolivia, our Stephen Ministry, all are about providing for people's physical, emotional and mental needs, and thereby caring for their spiritual lives.

Today I want to focus on Family Promise. Recently a Family Promise center lost power and the workers had to go home. The power to the phone and answering machine was

not out, and they came back the next day to find their box full of messages. I'm going to play some of those for you. (play voices)

The need for shelter, in a difficult transition is one of the scariest things, that most of us will never have to face, but hopefully in hearing these voices, you can picture the diversity of their faces as well, and realize these are real people, who have a real need for basic shelter. Our Family Promise program, which we share with area churches, helps people with basic shelter and food, while they struggle to get back into permanent homes. When we host them at our church.

The sanctuary in which we experience God on a weekly basis, becomes a sanctuary where they feel protected and safe each night they are with us. For them, Jesus becomes the roof over their heads, as well as the bread of their lives. And we become imitators of God, when we sacrificially give from our own abundance, of money, and especially our time to be with them.

At the end of the Roman Empire, the Christian Church became the only source of support for many people, as the previous social supports crumbled around them, in the face of invasions by powerful tribes. The Church provided sustenance for people, and catapulted in importance from being merely a religion among many, to becoming the main support for the common people.

During these days of uncertainty, we have an opportunity. We can become a main source of support, for people who struggle to have their basic needs met. We can become images of the bread of life, the shelter of sanctuary. We can be imitators of God, as we remember that we are members of one another. When we do this important mission work, we invite people to taste and see that the Lord is Good. And gradually our Episcopal Shield comes back into the picture, this shield can come to mean sanctuary for homeless people, bread for the hungry, clothes for the cold.

It is possible that the Episcopal Church in many parts of our country will become increasingly irrelevant, and gradually leave people's consciousness, as the shield leaves the sign. But not at Church of the Ascension. As long as we continue to focus on the mission work we will become increasingly relevant, and God will be glorified in the hearts and minds of the people we serve.

Visit with Ann O'Connor today, after this service and find out about the Pasta Cookoff for Family Promise, see how you can help. We are doing Good things for those around us here at the Ascension, and the best is yet to come!