

## **Sermon for Pentecost VII 2009**

**July 19 2009**

**by the Rev. Steve Fuller**

In today's Gospel we heard the following, The Apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." Jesus was in fact, inviting them to take a much needed vacation for themselves, something we all need to do to renew our own strength, faith, minds and family life. Our bodies need it or we become too tired to continue. Our church life may need it from time to time to explore and grow spiritually, by visiting other church communities and returning back to our own. We need the time to explore books, classes, art and more to help our minds grow so we can again, share with those around us. And finally, our family needs us to take time away from our jobs so we can grow closer to each other. It sounds so simple to say, but doing it, well that is the hardest part.

I hope that I had the time to do the children's homily this morning, but just let me again say, we cannot go in any direction without guidance of some type. We can plan for getaways using books and friends to help us plan, finding the right travel agent to book our flights, get in the car to begin our journey, but we still need guidance of some type to get us going. I used the compass to show that we need direction in our lives, something tangible to point us in our life journey. A compass shows us the north, south, east and west, but is no use with out a place in mind to go to. A map shows us the places, but we still need the compass to keep us going straight and on course. Our church life relies on the Book of Common Prayer to keep us moving forward in our life journey and the cross on the front of my BCP, is the north, south, east and west of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Similarly in the first reading of Samuel, we hear of tents and rest. I thought about bringing in a tent to show the meaning of the lesson,

yet I thought better of it. To me, this lesson speaks of a people always on the move, relying of lives spent in tents, easy to move, but no place to call home. A tent is portable whereas a house, home, church means laying down permanent “roots” in a place you wish to call home. We have people who come to Immanuel for a short while and for whatever reason decide to move on. They have not yet decided to lay down their roots and build upon our foundation. We are supposed to be a giving community which means sharing space in our lives so others can join us and lay down roots. Lately though, I am not so sure that we wish to do that. We recently lost seven members of the family and I do not know what to do to get them back. It is not necessary to know why they left. It is not necessary to know if they will come back. We do however, need to find a way to keep this from happening again in the future. We have lost many members over the last couple of years and I am puzzled as to why. We have a few good weeks and then we have several bad ones. Internal “grumbling” if you will, spins around and grows to the boiling point for many.

For some guidance, I returned to the Book of Common Prayer and on pg. 409 I read the following on the *Disciplinary Rubrics*, laws that pertain to all if you wish. Now these may sound far fetched to some but I want you hear them,

**If the priest knows that a person who is living a notoriously evil life intends to come to Communion, the priest shall speak to that person privately, and tell *him* that *he* may not come to the Holy Table until *he* has given clear proof of repentance and amendment of life.**

**The priest shall follow the same procedure with those who have done wrong to their neighbors and are a scandal to the other members of the congregation, not allowing such persons to receive Communion until they have made restitution for the wrong they have done, or have at least promised to do so.**

**When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, *he* shall speak privately to each of them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other.**

**And if the person or persons on one side truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn.**

**In all such cases, the priest is required to notify the bishop, within fourteen days at the most, giving the reasons for refusing Communion.**

These words my friends, are words of wisdom that our ancestors have left us with. Words I hope that I never have to follow and enforce.

We walk this journey as a family and when a family member is hurt, so are we all.

So what are we to do in the future to help others want to put their tents away and lay down more permanent roots with us? Perhaps the answer lies hidden inside the second lesson today from Ephesians... for he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Summer is a time for vacations and renewal. We have just returned from a much needed rest in the Pocono Mt. Area of Pennsylvania. We enjoyed both the mountains and lake regions and the fellowship that a family shares with one another. We played cribbage, swam in

the lake, watched the deer and bears feed and play. We did some in-state travel and followed our GPS to get to and from places we were not familiar with. We took the time to play softball and volleyball with other family guests and for one week out of the year, did not have to be bothered, by family, phones or e-mail. We “tented” as travelers in someone else’s land. We drove down one Sunday and back the next and therefore missed two Sunday’s of services here at Immanuel. I personally miss that connection. I mentioned that in my last Priest-Point-of-View letter as I knew that I would be away. This does not happen often to me. I usually will find a local church when we travel, if I can. I like to visit the other churches and see what they do different and how it attracts different people. How can I learn from someone else? Life after all is a continual learning experience. Share what you know with someone else and they will share with you. This continues to be a growing edge for Immanuel. We have the “people base” to build from, yet we do not use it to its fullest. We have the knowledge, but we do not share or ask someone to share it with us. We have those with experience in life yet do not ask them to share lives experiences. We have what it takes to become a growing, thriving community in faith, perhaps one of the biggest in the state, yet we cannot overcome certain obstacles. We have almost all of what it takes to succeed, yet we do not know how to use what God has given us.

Our tents are small enough to pack them up and build a house of cedar. Our problems are little compared to those of other communities. We do in fact need to move on in our minds to gather what God has given us and establish a thriving community of faith and family, one that young families would want to visit and lay down roots to build on.

Let me end with a passage from a book that Mark may have the Ministry Support Team read. It is entitled, “Behold, I do a new thing.” It deals with transforming communities of faith.

“Being the pastor of a church does not mean that you are the leader or can exercise much leadership. To use the analogy of the club or clan again: the pastor may play the role of clan priest, They may be called on to perform meaningful rituals and rites of passage at the appropriate times, but that does not mean that they lead the clan. The primary leadership role – the chief- may be occupied by someone who thinks they own the church, and perhaps in many ways they, do. In churches lacking a chief, the tribe may be controlled by a group of powerful elders who require a religious functionary to do their bidding. In either case, the pastor is not expected to lead and their efforts may be blocked.

Entering into a new pastorate and after a few months of living in a congregation, a new pastor may see problems standing out in high relief and say, “Why on earth do they do things like that here?” or “Why doesn’t anyone other than me see the problem?” The answer is that it’s kind of like the yellow crud on your stove or the black mold on your bathroom wall. It builds up so slowly over time that it’s not noticeable until it really looks disgusting – but a visitor may see it immediately.

Before rushing in and trying to make major changes – to scrape up all the crud and throw it away - we should realize that “ most people, most of the time, are unaware of the discrepancy between what they intend and what they do.” They don’t notice the problems, and in a few years a pastor may be trained so well that they won’t notice them either.

The pastor cannot command such an organization to change. The pastor must lead members to an awareness of what the function of the church should be, and they must do so within a structure of entrenched power and influence that may hinder or help their efforts. The church, like all other social groups, is not a machine that has been constructed to perform specific tasks. It is a living thing that has grown. It cannot be taken apart, fixed, and reassembled like an

automobile engine, but it can be fertilized, pruned, and its growth can be guided. Future growth will only emerge from what is already there.

In order to exercise leadership, a pastor needs friends and allies who share similar perceptions of what the purpose of the church is. It also helps if some of those people have power and influence in the congregation. Lacking the support of a network, the pastor may remain in the position of clan priest or hired hand. Or, if they try to force a new agenda on an unwilling power structure, they might be out of a job or marginalized within the congregation.

In a long-stagnant Baptist church in Springdale, Arkansas, the new pastor began visiting people in the small city who were known to be unchurched. Beginning alone, after a few weeks he asked a sympathetic church member to accompany him. Despite their rhetoric, few Baptist churches have the energy and commitment to do much evangelism. This pastor had both the energy and commitment, and he believed that evangelism should be central to the mission of any church. Through the efforts of this pastor and a few interested laypersons, many unchurched people in the community came to see God in a new way and were baptized into church membership. Baptisms were held on Sunday mornings, rather than Sunday night, so that more people (in the church and community) could see how lives were being changed. Friends and family members came and saw the transformation for themselves.

Slowly, more and more people in the congregation became excited about what was happening. People were coming to know Christ, church members were learning how to share their faith, and more and more new people – some well known for their previous ill feelings about the church – were joining. Through this process, the pastor developed a large support base.

Some powerful, long term members of the church were not excited about the changes, however. The traditional, reverent worship services had become a bit too enthusiastic. Some of the new

members didn't dress very well and spoke up in business meetings when they should have kept quiet. They had never been trained in proper church etiquette. It also became clear that a new sanctuary would be necessary if growth continued. The church was not the same....

**Let us pray...**

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whom all our intercessions are acceptable through the Spirit, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*