

LENT IV

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:9-10

"But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." John 3:21

The Gospel of John, which we hear today, is my least favorite Gospel in many respects. It does have some unique and excellent stories – the Samaritan woman at the well, for example. But John is far more abstract and theologically wordy than the other gospels – far less narrative—and John’s Jesus seems barely human much of the time. He is the post-resurrection Jesus, mostly divine, kingly and triumphant, and thus less helpful to me as a companion in my all-too-human journey.

But my biggest difficulty with John is the divisiveness of so much of his rhetoric – his us versus them approach. John is the last and latest of the canonical gospels – the ones deemed worthy of inclusion in the New Testament– and John is writing to followers of Jesus who were increasingly separate, and increasingly unwelcome, in the Jewish community. Consequently, when John writes about the enemies of Jesus, he frequently refers to them as ‘the Jews.’ In fact, of course, Jesus was a Jew, and what John means by “the Jews,” is “the religious authorities.” That’s how I try to translate John when I read his Gospel.

The Gospel of John has been used throughout the centuries as “evidence” that “the Jews” killed Jesus, and hence this Gospel has been a dangerous instrument of anti-Semitism. For that reason, we at St. John’s no longer read the Passion Gospel of John on Good Friday – as prevention against perpetuating misunderstanding and prejudice, and as a small token of repentance on behalf of the Church for evil done in our name.

Today’s Gospel reading does not talk about “the Jews.” We do hear, however, *but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they*

have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And John goes on and on about *children of light* and *children of darkness*. John's world is, all too often, a divided world, and world of inclusion and exclusion, a world that seems in many ways inimical to the kingdom of God envisioned by Jesus. And not a world I want to inhabit.

However, both the Epistle and the Gospel have a message for us about *deeds done in the light*, and being *created by Jesus Christ for good works*, and it is that message about which I wish to speak.

You have been reading and hearing recently about St John's new outreach effort, Angel Food Ministries. I hope you have been coming to understand what this ministry is about, but remembering a motto of communications gurus: *redundancy, redundancy, redundancy!* – I'm going to talk more about Angel Foods today.

Now remember, we had been planning to take a sabbatical year here at St John's to pray and reflect on the next direction God is calling us into as a parish. We had completed the basement renovation, marriage equality was secure, and it was time for a rest.

However, in the fall, our Junior Warden Rob Watters came to the vestry with a proposal to participate in a food distribution program. This is not a handout, not free food. People place an order for groceries, pay for them, and come to pick them up at a predetermined site once a month. Essentially, these shoppers receive double value for their money.

Rob argued that this population – not the homeless or extremely poor – but the economically vulnerable – is our target population. And our niche population, if you will. We don't get much foot traffic here at St John's – people looking for handouts – because we are a bit off the beaten track. The First Baptist Church gets plenty of those desperately need folk, and the church has a food card program to accommodate them. Angel Food ministries is devised for anyone – and everyone – who may be economically vulnerable, and so many of us are, increasingly so, in this current crisis.

Our vestry discussion about Rob's proposal was a Spirit-filled, moving, conversation. The kind of meeting that happens all too rarely – the kind that reminds us who we are and who we aim to be, people *created by Jesus Christ for good works*.

A couple of us raised questions and reservations, but these were hashed over and resolved. Andrew Shieffelin, our wise and faithful treasurer, said, “We can either do this, or do nothing.” And, despite our plan to be on a Sabbath year, *doing nothing* seemed suddenly and definitively not to be an option.

I believe that it was after that discussion, that meeting, when Nicole Valtz decided to answer the call to be our Senior Warden. This was a group she wanted to lead. I know I walked home with a glad and grateful heart, thinking *I am so proud and honored to be the priest to this community. I am so thankful to God for having called me here so many years ago, and for having called and challenged me, over and over again, to stay.*

In a recent email to Nicole and me, Rob was talking about Angel Food Ministries. He wrote words to this effect, “ I don’t quite understand this, but I have to do this. I can’t not do it. I feel like it’s a calling. “

Well, hear this! It is a calling. It is a call.

Over the years, as most of you know, I’ve done a good deal of work with people in the ordination process, or considering the ordination process – folks we at St John’s have sponsored for ordination, field ed students and Micah interns, and others who’ve come to me for advice and counsel. And many of you know too, I think, that last summer the bishop appointed me Chaplain to all those who have been accepted into the diocesan ordination process – that’s about 25 at the moment, I think, and another 25 or so recently accepted. I’m supposed to meet with all these folks twice a year.

And so over the years, and particularly intensely in the last few months, I have heard many, many stories about “the call.” Or “a call.” What is it? Where does it come from? How do we test it? Where does it lead us?

Now I have to say that the advice I always give to people wondering if they have a call to ordination is this: *if you have any other choice, take it.* Those prophets like Jonah who heard a call from God and ran in the other direction were not stupid. What God demands of us is often not fun, easy, or rewarding in any way that the world recognizes.

And indeed, the stories about the quest for ordination that I trust most – and the people who tell them I have the most confidence in, often – are the

ones which say *I kept trying to ignore this call, and it kept coming back. It wouldn't leave me alone.*

I say *it* here rather than *God*, because I believe that the call to ordination is a call from the Church. The call to ordination is a call to serve the Church, to serve God in a particular (and peculiar) role in the Church. The most trustworthy call to ordination, in my view, is something we *can't not do*. Because if we could do anything else, and had any good sense, we would.

But as Christians, as followers of Jesus, we are all called into service. We are all called into ministry.

Years ago, here at St John's, we participated in a program called *From Charity to Justice*, offered by the Episcopal City Mission. It was an intensive program that ended up with our choosing a local organization to work with in outreach. We worked for a number of years with a group called Co-operative Economics for Women, a co-op of immigrant women's microbusinesses. Parishioners tutored the women in English and math and life-skills, and tutored their children as well, and we engaged in various other partnerships with them

One thing I remember clearly about the teachings of that program is that any successful effort at outreach and justice work has to include an element of self-interest. Otherwise, the effort will falter and fail.

Now, our recent works have had obvious elements of self-interest. A large fraction of our congregation has benefited personally from marriage equality. As Andrew said, again wisely and succinctly, about the basement project, "If we don't do this soon, the basement will become unusable." And our effort has paid off exponentially in the presence of a vibrant preschool tenancy in our downstairs space."

What's the self-interest for St John's in Angel Food Ministries? That's a bit less clear. While many of us could benefit personally from more groceries for less money, we are not – or not yet – as imperiled financially as many. For some of us, the self-interest is in responding to something we *can't not do*, to checking something off that imperative, nagging, *to do list*. And I believe that as more and more of us sign up to participate as

volunteers on a monthly Saturday morning, for more and more, this will be something *we can't not do*.

But for the community as a whole, I believe, and for all of us at the deepest level, the self-interest is the same as it was for those who participated in the *From Charity to Justice Program*. The self-interest lies in answering our call as Christians, as followers of Jesus. The self-interest lies in becoming more fully the people, and the community, we are meant to be, ***created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life; those (who) come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God***

Amen.