

PENTECOST XVI

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. James 3 :13ff

Even before I read the lessons for today, I had it in my mind, somehow, to preach about ambition. Not, I hope, in the grim and scolding way James does in this epistle— his is a rather grim and scolding letter, what Martin Luther called “the epistle of straw.”

But the theme of ambition was somehow on my heart as I returned from sabbatical: a result, I imagine, of the reflection I did about my ministry during my time away from St. John’s.

As many of you know, before I entered the ordination process I did my doctoral work in English on the poetry of George Herbert, 17th Century English priest and poet. It was his life and work that reached out to me across the centuries and led me into my own priesthood. His story, very briefly, is that, as a young aristocrat and scholar, he lost a promising career path in politics when his patrons all died. He then took Holy Orders and became rector of two tiny rural parishes outside of Salisbury England. By all accounts, for the last 3 years of his life, when he served those parishes, he achieved a contentment and fulfillment he had not known before.

Herbert writes about ambition in his poetry – ambition about his spiritual life and ambition about poetry. He writes, about his early relationship with God,

I lookèd on Thy furniture so fine,
And made it fine to me ;
Thy glorious household stuff did me entwine,
And 'tice me unto Thee.
Such stars I counted mine : both heaven and earth
Paid me my wages in a world of mirth.

What pleasures could I want, whose King I served,
Where joys my fellows were ?
Thus argued into hopes, my thoughts reserved
No place for grief or fear ;
Therefore my sudden soul caught at the place,
And made her youth and fierceness seek Thy face :

And about his poetry,

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention ;
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.

But by all accounts, when he moved to his parishes of Bemerton and Fuggleston, or perhaps earlier with the decision to take Holy Orders, he gave up ambition of a worldly sort. He worked to be the best country parson he could be, the most effective minister to his flock, and he worked to make his poetry a humble prayer (albeit most elegantly crafted) and offering to God.

Something similar happened to me somewhere along the way in my ministry. When Tom Shaw was elected bishop, in 1995 I think, I, who had always been one of the diocesan left-fringe priests, suddenly became mainstream. I was appointed to lots of committees, and spent a great deal of time on diocesan work. It was a very different experience for me, and exciting and heady for a while.

But you know, the fast track lost its lustre for me. Along the line I decided I did not want to be a bishop, I did not want to be on a bishop's staff, and I did not want to be rector of a big fancy suburban parish- as if they would have me! I wanted to be at St. John's, where I felt I had a chance to make a difference in the lives of people and a community, rather than becoming a functionary, a bureaucrat of the church, or a rector who would have to devote much of my time to administration. I missed my role as a gadfly, my focus on social justice issues.

And what a relief! Some of this development had to do with my age, I think, but most of it had to do with finding (and recognizing) the place I believed God meant me to be. That confidence has been a great gift and blessing, even in the darkest of times here at St. John's. I look around at my colleagues – many of them younger, but not all of them – who are still jockeying for position and advancement in the institutional Church, and I feel fortunate that I'm not in that place any more.

What changed for me in giving up that larger career drive, that ambition for myself, was a renewed and different commitment to this parish. I remember saying to

Sam, some years ago, *well, now my ambition's all focused on the parish. It needs to be the best place it can be.* That sounds obvious, and like the commitment that should have been there all along – but such a relationship between priest and people takes time to develop. And of course it was risky to place my hopes and fears so completely on the community – it meant I would not measure success or failure solely on my own achievements. Outcomes would depend on the whole community, and I would need to trust the whole community.

Of course, such decisions and commitment are rarely entirely clearcut. As we all know, a good deal of my focus for some years was on the struggle for marriage equality. But, in the wonderful way the Holy Spirit works, that focus, I believe, drew the parish community together in the struggle, helped us become a destination and sanctuary for gay families and a beacon of hope in the diocese and the Commonwealth.

What I'm trying to get to here is the difference between personal ambition and commitment to a cause or goal. Of course, it's a very rare person who's entirely free of personal ambition, and I don't pretend to be one. But I feel a relative freedom from the temptations of personal aggrandizement, and that freedom is a gift from God.

But I do continue to have ambitions, hopes and dreams, for St. John's, that we may go from strength to strength together. I said something about this to the vestry at our meeting this week. Some of what I reflected on during sabbatical was very pragmatic. I'd like us to be better organized –not for the sake of organization itself, but so that we can invite more people into the activities required to keep our community together and moving forward, so that we can recognize and incorporate into our communal life the many gifts, talents, and ideas, that you all bring with you here. On the most concrete level, this means peopling our committees with more volunteers –and this means you.

Our vestry is an incredibly dedicated and hard-working group, as all the vestries I've worked with here have been. But we constantly face the problem of burnout because so few people are doing so much. We need to widen the circle. My hope and my prayer is that you, all of you, will be inspired to join in.

On a more personal level, my ambition, my hope and desire upon returning from sabbatical, is to establish deeper relationships with more of you. I said this to the vestry as well. When I entered parish ministry, I imagined that much of my time would be spent doing counseling with individuals, and perhaps couples. I imagined that people would come to me with their problems and crises and that we would sit and talk and pray

together and that I would be able to offer a thoughtful presence and some spiritual and practical guidance.

That hasn't happened to the extent I'd hoped, or that I would like. I often hear "I know you're busy. I didn't want to bother you."

Well, being bothered *is my job*. That's what being a priest to the people means, at bottom – not being an administrator or a chair of meetings, or even, in my case, first and foremost, an activist for social justice. The principal priestly function is celebrating the eucharist with and for the community, and, honestly, I believe, that function is far more profoundly and sacramentally performed when I know as fully as possible the hearts and minds of the community with whom I celebrate.

That may not be great systematic theology – systematics tends to be absent personality – but it's how the incarnation feels to me. The personal matters. The personal deepens. The personal illuminates and transforms. And so, I believe, the better I can know you, the better I can love you, and the more fully I will continue to become your priest.

So, a few thoughts on ambition, loosely defined, and I hope more positive and grace-filled than James's dour epistle. James does say, at the close of today's portion, *Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.*

Or, as George Herbert says,

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there.
Thy power and love, my love and trust,
Make one place ev'ry where.

And, my dear friends, my hope and prayer for us is just so, that together *we may draw nearer to God, and God to us.*

Alleluia! Amen