

May 29, 2016 The Rev'd Dr. Robert W. Seney

Pentecost 2 [C-Proper 4] May 29, 2016: St. Andrew's. Denver

In the Name of Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier: Amen

[1 Kings 18:20-21, \(22-29\), 30-39](#)

[Psalm 96](#)

[Galatians 1:1-12](#)

[Luke 7:1-10](#)

Today we begin in earnest the *Season of Pentecost*. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the **Feast of the Pentecost**: the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is beautifully depicted in the fifth panel of our altar reredos. Last Sunday, we contemplated the mystery of how God has expressed Himself through the *Trinity*. Today we begin in this season of the *Sundays after the Pentecost* what is known as *Ordinary Time*, which does not mean common place or every day, but rather it means an ordered or numbered time. The Latin term is *tempus per annum*, which translated is *time during the year*. Ordinary Time then is the numbering of Sundays after a major feast day.

One of the purposes of the new *Revised Common Calendar* is that over a three year period in *Lectionaries A, B, and C*, we will read most of the *Bible*. However, this sometimes makes it difficult for preachers since the same theme may or may not run through the three lessons, however, this is not necessarily true for our lessons for today. So over the years, it has become my practice to select a theme and to create a series of sermons that are tied together. I suggested that theme in my first Sunday with you three weeks ago.

As we begin this season, one of the things which simply cannot go un-noticed is that there does seem to be an over-riding theme in most of the lessons of this season dealing with the idea that this is a time for new beginnings.

Several years ago, a meditation from *Forward Day by Day*, [Monday, May 23, 2013] phrased it beautifully. Let me quote:

*Today, we enter the long season that is often called "ordinary time." It is also a day for fresh starts. ...These new beginnings remind us of God who, through, the Holy Spirit, is constantly renewing our lives, giving us a fresh start over and over again. It is the goodness of the Resurrection, true for us every day...*

*Through the Holy Spirit, God is right here with us, like a stream of living water, sustaining us and giving us new life. Once again, it is a fresh start.* End of quote.

So today, we begin our summer pilgrimage, our summer journey in faith, to seek new beginnings. As we look at our lessons for today, it is easy to see this theme of new beginnings developing. Certainly our first clue is found most powerfully in our *Psalm: Psalm 96:1*:

*Sing to the Lord a **new** song; sing to the Lord, all the whole Earth.*

Then as we back track to our *Old Testament Lesson*, we have the wonderful story of Elijah proving to the people of Israel that God, Yahweh, is the one true God and this becomes a new beginning for the people of Israel who had departed from the Teachings.

Then in our Epistle Lesson from *St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* whose beginning is, in my opinion, one of his more beautiful beginnings and salutations: *To the Churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for*

*our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Paul writes to bring the Galatians back to the teachings which he had given them and to ignore those who are “perverting the Gospel of Christ.” This certainly is a call to a new beginning.

Our Gospel Lesson from *St. Luke* then tells the amazing story of the Roman Centurion who out of concern for a favorite servant, the scriptures read slave, who is very ill, sends for Jesus, but recognizing that Jesus is “one with authority” such as he is, that all Jesus needed to do was to speak the word and his servant would be healed. And Jesus responds: *I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.* The servant is healed and this represents the new beginning of faith that Jesus was sent to deliver and create.

New beginnings. // This brings us to the theme which I hope to develop this summer in my sermons on the Sundays I am with you during Mother Elizabeth’s sabbatical. This theme is based on the book by Father Dwight J. Zscheile (“shay-le”) entitled *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity*, which I introduced in my first sermon with you. Dwight was the speaker at our 2013 Clergy Conference. When I was with you, we briefly discussed the theme of this book and I suggested some ways that we might incorporate some of those ideas into our common life here at St. Andrew’s.

I am quite fond of our book of meditations, *Forward Day By Day*. It has been part of my daily devotions for I honestly don’t know how many years. I actively read it with highlighter in hand and it is not unusual for me to either copy or tear pages out, which are then placed in my file of sermon ideas. In looking through this file, I found one mediation marked with a sticky note: *New Beginnings*. I think it provides a perfect **spring board** for us as we begin this discussion. Let me share just the last paragraph with you: *The desire for a constant is stronger than ever in a quickly changing world like ours today. And even if the Gospel doesn’t change, // because we change, our experience of it will be ever-renewing and ever-changing. Disconcerting as it may feel, Jesus is still on the move, leading us into all truth. As a friend of mine is fond of saying from the pulpit: “Jesus has left the building – and we will find Him out there on the streets.”*

This is actually one of the first concepts that Dwight addresses in his book. In the past, we have seen the Church as the place where you go to find God. We have assumed that people know where we are and come to us already Christians, sincerely or nominally so, and that our task is simply to welcome them and to nurture them. But in our every growing **secular** society, this is no longer true.

As we discuss his ideas, I think it’s important to know just who Dwight is. He is an Episcopal priest and an assistant professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is also associated with St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in St. Paul, where his wife, also a priest, is the rector. He is relatively young. I’m not sure just how old he is, but he mentioned that his children are in elementary school.

He begins his book by telling the story of a young man, who, he finally admits, is himself and that this **is** his story. He tells of a lad who grows up in a secular home in California – where he almost humorously comments “where the church has never been well established.” He had been baptized as an infant, but the story of Jesus had long ceased to shape his family’s life. He wasn’t looking for a church – church was not even in the horizon of his awareness. Church goers were a minority in his home town and had little impact on the secular culture of his community. He notes: *The great majority had no connection to any faith community, and non-*

*Western religions were more popular than main line Protestantism. People were more likely to try to find God in a walk in the woods than in an organized faith community. Those churches in town could have been the most welcoming in the world to visitors, and it would not have done this boy, or most of their other neighbors, any good.* (Page 1)

He points out later that this is probably the situation throughout America today and that this is the rule more than the exception. He then goes on to tell how God had come to **him**, where **he** was – and it was not in church. This happened primarily through his reading of great literature where the Christian life played a central role. It happened through the example of a friend who modeled a life of compassion, forgiveness, and grace. And then in college, members of the Campus Crusade for Christ taught him another story in which he learned that every human life is precious beyond measure, created for loving relationship with the source of all life. Here are his words: *In this story; [as told by the Campus Crusade youth] your worth is given, not earned. Rather than bearing the weight of making it all up as you go, you find yourself in a common narrative that goes back many generations. You are welcomed into a community of unlike people where differences need not be cause for division, as is so often the case in our world. You are offered forgiveness for your faults and errors, for the violence you do to others and this earth, and so are released to forgive others and break the cycle of hatred and retribution. You are claimed by a love and power beyond your own. You are held in arms of grace. And in that embrace, you are freed to participate in the restoration of human community and all creation. For this boy, this was good news indeed.*

He soon parted ways with the Campus Crusade and he found a home in the Episcopal Church and I think it is important to know why. Because, in my opinion, he has related what I feel are the very things which as Episcopalians we should be sharing with the world.

First, it was here that he was nourished in the rich sacramental tradition anchored in an expansive depth of Christian teaching and practice. It was here that he discovered the rich tradition of ordered prayer and how that practice shapes the heart, the mind, and the imagination. He writes: *In this church there was a holistic embrace of the senses, the intellect, and the body, with a passionate commitment to participating in the healing of the world. It was a community that spoke to what he – and so many other young people in today's world – yearned for deeply, a community in which to receive a new identity and new life in Christ. It was not a perfect community—indeed, sometimes it was exasperating as any community is – yet God's grace came alive for him there.* (Page 2)

What Dwight has basically listed are what we called the non-negotiables of the Episcopal Church. Basically they were identified in the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral*, a document created to lead the church in ecumenical discussions. It was first articulated and approved by our House of Bishops in 1886; adopted by the 1888 Lambeth Conference; and finally reworded with more modern language in the 1920 Lambeth Conference, which as you know is a meeting of all the Bishops of the Anglican Communion convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury every ten years. Basically there are four non-negotiables: Scripture and Tradition; the Sacraments; the Creeds; and the Apostolic ministry. We hold these four things as being essential to our understanding of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. They are, if you will, the core values of our discipline. They create what we can easily call “the Episcopal identity.”

It is these values, this identity that brought Dwight to the Episcopal Church. He now raises the question: How do we witness – share – these core values to an ever increasing secular world? That is why Dwight says he wrote this book. In his words: *This is a book about renewing Episcopal identity for twenty-first-century America.* (Page 3)

In an ever increasing secular society, in which recently I read and I can't remember where – that non-Christians are often more knowledgeable about the Faith than Christians, how, then, do we proclaim and live the *Good News of Jesus Christ* and share the Episcopal core values and identity as we seek to become People of the Way?

This is what I hope for us to consider in my sermons with you during Mother Elizabeth's' sabbatical. This is what I propose will be the focus of our spiritual journey, our pilgrimage during this *Season of the Sundays After Pentecost*. May God help us and guide us as we seek to find and know His will.

I think it might be well for us to end today with the *Collect for Bible Sunday*. In the old calendar, *Bible Sunday*, so called because of the collect for the day, was on the *Second Sunday of Advent*, but in the *Revised Common Calendar*, *Bible Sunday* is now on the next to the last Sunday of this *Season of Pentecost*. While it is directed towards the study of Holy Scripture, it has become a popular prayer before all godly study. And it might help us and lead us in our thoughts this summer.

Let us pray:

*Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them,*

*to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that through patience, and the comfort of your Holy Word,*

*we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in Our Savior Jesus Christ.*

Amen