

## Parish Meeting Sermon

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 20, 2008

Huston Smith is a well-known scholar of comparative religions. In one fable or parable he tells about a man who once climbed to the top of a mountain in search of Truth. Standing on this tiptoes at the crest of the mountain, he seized hold of Truth. Satan, who had suspected that this seeker was up to mischief, had one of his underling demons follow the man. The demon rushes back down from the mountain top and with alarm reports the seeker's success. "He has grasped Truth," shouts the demon in a panic. Satan wasn't ruffled. "Don't worry," he yawned. "I'll tempt him to institutionalize the Truth." [Cited in *Synthesis*, January 20, 2008, p. 4]

Huston Smith is a mystic, and scholar and academic. As such he is perfectly free to point out the shortcoming of institutions, including the ones in which he has earned a living for many decades. Though I know of the dangers of institutions, I stand here today as the rector of this congregation, on the morning of our annual parish meeting, and am a representative of institutionalized religion. I take umbrage with what seems to be Smith's wholesale dismissal of religious institutions.

This day is always an occasion for me to take a look at our beloved parish. And I do so first by acknowledging that St. Peter's Church is as much an institution as it is the living Body of Christ. The two are inevitably intertwined. But to take Dr. Smith's challenge seriously, we need to be asking ourselves: Are we nurturing or starving the Truth of the Gospel? Or, as our collect of the day says, are we being "illuminated by your Word and Sacraments" so that we may "shine with the radiance of Christ's glory"?

I'd like to explore this question briefly under the rubric of two phrases, one taken directly from the Gospel and one derived from what happens in this lesson from the second chapter of John's Gospel. In the Gospel we hear John the Baptist's proclamation to his own disciples: "Look, here is the Lamb of God." John is endorsing another rabbi in front of his own students! Is it surprised that two of his disciples immediately left tag along behind Jesus?

Noticing them, Jesus turns and asks, "What are you looking for?" They say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" What a banal question we might think. Not necessarily. They were asking to come and learn to from him wherever he was teaching. "Come and see," said Jesus. Come and see.

Immediately following this, we learn that one of these new disciples is Andrew and his brother is Simon, about to be named Peter by Jesus. Andrew and the other unnamed disciple go and tell Simon, "We have found the Messiah." And the rest is history. The seeds of the church are planted.

Come and see. Go and tell. Are we nurturing the Truth of the Gospel by who we are and what we do at St. Peter's?

One of the underlying tensions in many healthy congregations—and some that are not so healthy as St. Peter’s—is the pull between caring for one’s own members and reaching out to those who are not, at least for now, one of us. The tension between “Come and see” and “Go and tell.” You may know that I think that both are necessary; coming to see should inspire us to go and tell. One should feed the other.

St. Peter’s has a long history of reaching out to those in need. We are known for our outreach. Yet, many would like us to do more outreach. Part of the tension, as always, concerns money and budgets and resources. As we have grown as a parish, we have finally increased our staff size and are also currently spending a large part of our income on mortgage payments. And we need more space, larger buildings. To some this may seem just selfish. I think not, in the long run.

An investigation of congregations would reveal that there are very, very few churches which do not spend the vast majority of their budget on staff, building costs and other expenditures that might seem purely internal. The few exceptions are often wealthy or endowed parishes with smaller congregations. They see their mission as sharing their wealth. Another exception is inner city parishes that, again with small congregations, see their mission primarily to help those in need in their immediate, often very poor neighborhoods. Most of their budget usually comes from outside donations or grants.

There is a deeper theological reason, I think, why congregations use the majority of their resources on “themselves.” Simply put, it’s because people “come and see” and need be nurtured to grow in the faith. Jesus did spend a lot of time teaching his disciples. Episcopal parishes are complex organisms with lots of parts! So the proper question to ask might be: Do our liturgies and music and preaching and teaching and pastoral care and fellowship reflect the love of Christ which transforms lives? How can we use our resources to more fully live out our mission? How do we spiritually feed those who come and see? Such is the primary mission of the church.

Yet, we cannot exist just for ourselves. The vestry has agreed to look very carefully out our outreach in the coming months, including how we spend our resources. What is outreach? Do we need to use more of our resources on “outsiders” and how do we do this and where? And we need to really investigate the subtleties of our budget. How much of our staff and building expenses are also used to reach out to those in need beyond the parish? We must go and tell.

While some want us to give away more, there are others who think that we might already give too much of our time and treasure to those beyond our walls. If we are going to continue to grow as a parish, our need for staff and space will only increase. Shouldn’t we first take of those needs more adequately? This is a valid question and one that we have answered “yes” to during the past year or so. But these real needs must be balanced with the Gospel need to be a light to the world. You cannot be the church and ignore outreach ministries.

My contention is that as we come and see and find somehow the love of Christ, then we will be moved to go and tell about it. To go and share the Good News with others. I cannot help

believe that the more we do a good job of feeding those who come and see, the more we will want to reach out both pastorally to our own members and also to the stranger, the outsider, the least and lost ones that are so dear to Christ.

Institutions can really kill the spirit and the truth. I would not want to help lead one that did. I believe that St. Peter's, albeit imperfectly, lives the truth. Only through our life in community, a life that has necessary institutional realities, can we continue to show forth the light of Christ to all, both inside and outside the parish walls.

Come and see. Go and tell.

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