Homily Proper 21B

September 26, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don’t know if you noticed it or not,

but our readings this morning contain a wonderful recipe.

No, I’m not talking about the list of ingredients in our first reading –

the fish, and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic –

though that does sound really good.

Rather, I see a recipe for church and Christian community.

As you know, this Wednesday we will have a celebration of new ministry,

commonly known as the institution of a new Rector.

As I commented in the e-news that went out on Friday,

in this particular liturgy,

I actually don’t have much to do.

I’m a piece of liturgical furniture.

Like a bride at a wedding, I show up in a nice white frock,

and I stand and sit and kneel and say a few words when asked.

And since I don’t get to preach on Wednesday,

consider this my own preamble to Wednesday’s liturgy,

if you’ll do the favor of indulging me for a moment.

As I said, our three readings this morning present us with a recipe –

a recipe for being Church together.

The Church is never about one person, aside from Christ Jesus.

The Church is about all of us, and the Church is the one organization

that exists solely for the benefit of those who are not already her members.

In our reading from the book of Numbers,

we encounter Moses bearing the burden of leadership.

The Israelites are starting to grumble and complain,

and so Moses turns to the Lord God for help.

God says to Moses, “Gather together seventy of the elders

who you know to have positions of respect and authority over the people,

and bring them into the tent of meeting with you.”

Moses does this,

and we are told that God takes some of the spirit that he had put on Moses

and puts it upon the seventy elders.

No one person can bear the burden of leadership alone –

as the Church began to grow after Jesus’s ascension into heaven,

the disciples likewise began to bring others into the fold of leadership:

this leadership started to take on different forms,

and there were overseers, elders, and deacons.

This evolved into the threefold ministry of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons

that we still have today in the Church.

But of course, the ministry of the Church is not limited to those persons

in ordained ministry.

If it were, the Church would never get much done.

The ministry of the Church belongs to all the baptized –

each and every one of you.

We are reminded of that as we reach the end of our journey

through the Epistle of James.

James exhorts the Christian community to be accountable to one another,

and to pray and support one another.

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord,”

James writes.

“Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

Church communities tend to be good about supporting their members

in times of sickness or ill health –

praying for them, and bringing meals by the house.

This comes naturally, and it is good and holy work.

Confessing sins to one another, though – well that is harder.

None of us like it when we screw up,

and it can be even harder to have to admit it and seek reconciliation.

However, the work of the Church and of the Christian community

is all about reconciliation.

The mission of the Church begun on the Cross

which has been spreading out across the world ever since

is a mission of reconciliation.

If you turn to page 855 in that Prayer Book in front of you in the pew,

you’ll read in the Catechism that the mission of the Church

is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ,

and that this ministry is carried out through all of its members.

A clergy friend of mine likes to call this the “three R’s” of mission,

and apologies if you’ve heard me say this before:

the Restoration of Right Relations between God and God’s people.

It may sound like a daunting prospect,

but it’s always been done by personal interaction,

beginning with Jesus and his encounter with the disciples,

and ever since then,

through encounters with the disciples and new members of the faith,

as they in turn encounter others.

The seemingly monumental task of reconciling all people

to unity with each other and with God

has only ever been accomplished by person-to-person interaction –

by encounter and witness.

So we have a recipe for Christian community

that involves shared leadership,

and mutual accountability,

as well as support and care for one another,

doing all of this in the Name of our Lord Jesus.

But we also have a couple of cautionary notes in our readings,

similar to those notes you might see in recipes:

make sure eggs and butter are at room temperature,

or be sure not to squeeze the lemon juice out of the lemons

until after you’ve zested the rind,

or allow filling to cool before adding it to pastry.

You get where I’m going.

Our first cautionary note is to not think that the activity of God

is solely contained within the Church.

Yes, we have the guarantee of God’s Holy Spirit

being at work in and through the Church and her Sacraments.

But we will be fools if we think that we’ve cornered the market on God.

In our reading from Numbers,

the spirit that comes to rest on the seventy elders

travels outside the tent of meeting,

and rests upon two men who remained in the camp.

As a result, they also start prophesying.

Someone runs to the tent of meeting and reports this to Aaron and Moses.

Aaron is outraged and implores Moses to stop them.

In a similar way,

the disciples complain to Jesus in our reading from Mark

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

In both instances,

they are frustrated and perplexed

that the special place of closeness to God

which they thought they alone were entitled to enjoy

is apparently not so.

And in both instances, both Moses and Jesus have similar responses.

Moses replies to Aaron,

“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

In other words, “What are you upset about? This is wonderful news.

Perhaps examine it is why you are upset.”

Instead of a limited priesthood, we have here a foreshadowing

of the priesthood of all believers that will come into being in the Church.

Jesus likewise tells his disciples to get over themselves –

to check their emotions and their anger,

and to examine their motivations.

As to this person healing in Jesus’s name without their permission,

he says, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

In other words,

Why on earth would you get in the way of the work of the kingdom?

Did you really think it’s all about you?

Jesus goes on to use some pretty strong rhetoric and hyperbole

to get his point across to the disciples:

if you would actually get in the way of the work of God,

it would be better for you to have a great millstone hung around your neck

and be thrown into the sea.

As an aside, I hope you know that Jesus, despite the strong language used,

is not actually advocating for drowning, nor self-mutilation.

But he sure got your attention, didn’t he?

The same cautionary warning applies to us as well:

we should always make sure we are not getting in the way

of people coming to know and love God.

We would do well to always maintain a posture of humility,

and simply witness and minister when and where we can.

But like Aaron and the seventy elders,

or John and the other disciples,

we may find ourselves surprised from time to time

when we encounter the work of God and the work of the Church

occurring in ways and in places that we did not expect to.

Instead of being selfishly annoyed that it didn’t take place with us,

we should be overjoyed and give thanks.

We should be prepared to encounter the work of the Holy Spirit

at all times and in all places and in all people:

not just inside these walls or among the people you meet here.

This is the kind of critical self-examination and self-reflection

that we must engage in as we go about the work of the Church

if we are to “have salt in ourselves,” as Jesus puts it.

We’ve got the recipe for how to be Church and Christian community,

but that recipe will always need to be tasted and adjusted for seasoning.

As we go along, setting about our work, it is entirely natural

that at times we start to accumulate and take on things

that in time outlive their usefulness.

There are also times that challenge us.

Like the Israelites lamenting in the desert,

we may look back to a previous time when we think we had it easier.

While we may certainly learn much from the past,

and while knowing our history

and celebrating the great cloud of witnesses who have run the race before

us is vital for our faith,

we will never reach the kingdom’s goal if we spend all our time

looking in the rearview mirror.

We are called to live into the present and imagine the future.

Nothing could add a more sour taste

or get in the way of the Spirit and the work of the kingdom

than simply remembering and longing for a time that was.

That would be the biggest millstone around our necks,

and will be the death of any Christian community.

As Jesus points out,

“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?”

We are to throw out the bad and preserve the good.

We are to have salt among ourselves – to purify and purge out the bad,

while preserving the best.

It is then that we have a recipe that is foolproof.

I hope that we can follow this recipe for Church and Christian community

together in the coming years.

There will be times that are fun, and times that are hard.

But that’s life, isn’t it.

So come, join with me in shared ministry.

Come labor alongside your fellow laborers in the vineyard of the Lord.

Come be a chef or sous chef or even a line cook in God’s kitchen.

It promises to be rewarding,

and the meal that is in store for us at the end of the day

is a meal that will surpass our wildest dreams,

and satisfy our deepest hunger.

What have you got to lose? Amen.