

Sermon: June 30, 2013

**“Companions for Mission”**

By Roy G. Pollina+

As the month of June draws to a close, I would like to use this time to talk about the two weeks I was absent earlier this month. No, this is not going to be a narrative of how I spent my summer vacation. At least one of the two weeks I was gone was not vacation time; I had a task to perform for the diocese. More accurately, Susan and I had a task to perform. Susan and I were asked by Bishop Powell to serve on the Diocesan Companions for Mission Committee; this was the first time we served on a church committee together. As you may know, the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia has a companion relationship with two dioceses in the Anglican Communion, The Diocese of the Sudan in Africa and The Diocese of Bradford in England. It has been the desire of the Companions for Mission committee that each church in our diocese be linked to a companion church in the diocese of Bradford. Sadly, most of the links are working poorly. Our church did not have an active link, although I am told we were linked to a Bradford church at one time. Nobody can remember the name of the church or the name of the town in England. Susan and I traveled to England to meet with the people and clergy in Bradford and to meet with the Bishop Nick Baines of Bradford. We wanted to see if there was still an interest in their diocese to be linked to our diocese and also, to find a parish church in the United Kingdom to link to our church.

Before I tell you what happen, let me tell you why I think making and keeping these links are important. Like many Episcopalians, I came to our church as an adult. I was attracted first by the beautiful liturgy of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. My love for our church grew deeper as I experienced a church willing to probe the difficult questions of our times. We Episcopalians depend on the sturdiness of that great Anglican three legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason to keep us from falling over into the excess of other denominations:

Tipping to one side into literal fundamentalism or tipping to the other side of spiritual caprice. The Episcopal Church believes in the best Protestant form that all things necessary for salvation are found in Holy Scripture. The Episcopal Church believes in the best catholic form that tradition guides the interpretation, understanding, and application of the lessons of Holy Scripture. The Episcopal Church is a constituent member of the world-wide Anglican Communion, a branch of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith. Because I love Jesus, I love the Church! The church is the Bride of Christ and the Church is the Body of Christ.

To quote Miroslav Volf: “One person’s relationship with one God in one world cannot be about one person.” Among other things, Volf is telling us that one can only properly follow Christ in the company of other Christians. I might add: what is true for the individual is also true for the congregation, the diocese and the ecclesiastical province. Sadly, it had been my experience that many in the Episcopal Church, both lay and ordained, seem to forget that we are joined to the worldwide Anglican Communion by bonds of affections that have deep historical roots. The Church of England is the mother church for our communion and the Archbishop of Canterbury is an important symbol of our historic unity. If we lose our connection to the Church of England and the See of Canterbury then the Episcopal Church becomes just another American Protestant denomination. Sadly, there are Episcopalians, lay, and clergy who do not have a problem with that and even welcome it. I have heard people say, “Well, isn’t that why we fought the Revolutionary War?” The sense of American individualism that has great political virtue can become something of a vice when applied to church relationships. Our

Episcopal Church must remain a branch of the world-wide Anglican Communion.

I wish every Episcopalian, especially Episcopal clergy, could have a day like I spent on my first Friday in England. Susan and I drove to the cathedral city of York and visited York Minster. The Church of England has two Archbishops in the two Provinces: Canterbury and York. Each Archbishop is Primate, first Bishop over the other bishops in his Province. Canterbury being the older of the two Provinces, the Archbishop of Canterbury is Primate of all England. York, in the north of England, has the Cathedral Church for the other Archbishop. There has been a Church on the site of York Minster since 627 A.D. The Medieval Gothic Cathedral was begun in 1220 and was completed in 1472. I do not have the words to describe adequately the beauty of this church with its stained glass and carved stone. In the undercroft, they have exposed the stones from the Roman camp that existed on the same grounds where the Cathedral was later built. It was hard for me to imagine that I might be standing near the place where, centuries before, the Roman legions declared their leader, Constantine, emperor. Later, in 314, it was Constantine who decreed an edict of Religious tolerance that led to making Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire.

After leaving York, Susan and I traveled to Keighly (pronounced: Keeth- lee) where we spent the next two nights with The Reverend Jonathan Pritchard, his wife, Anna, and their two children.

I found it mind boggling to spend the morning and afternoon drinking in the atmosphere of Roman Christianity, Anglo-Saxon Christianity, Norman Christianity, and Medieval Christianity in York and then in the evening to sit in the living room of an English Vicarage and discuss with an English Priest the issues of youth work, building maintenance, and the every growing secularization of society both in the United Kingdom and the United States. I firmly believe that regular contact between members of the Church of England and members of the Episcopal

Church will strengthen the Body of Christ for mission and ministry. Our church and theirs will be better for the friendship we share.

Beginning today, and at all of our public worship services, we will remember in our prayers The Rev'd Jonathan Pritchard and All Saints Church in Keighly, as they are remembering us in their prayers. All Saints and Christ Church will become companion churches. Jonathan + and I are working on ideas to make this new relationship work. We will invite each other to write articles for our newsletters. We thought we might pick a Sunday and swap liturgies; they will use our service and we will use theirs. It was suggested by Lewis Pitzer that our youth group could Skype with their youth group. Susan and I have invited the Pritchard family to stay with us on a visit to Virginia, hopefully next year. It would be great if some of our members began a correspondence with some of their members. The possibilities are virtually endless. We hope that the new technology will bring new ideas to keep us connected.

I know this homily did not connect well with any of today's readings, but it's ok to stray from the lectionary occasionally for an important message. We did not spend much time with today's Bible readings, but I do think today's Collect is a fitting ending, "Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."