

The Authority of the Laity

Two weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, St. Andrew's set out on a new adventure. An exciting adventure. A sabbatical adventure! What an opportunity for Dina. And what an opportunity for you, the people of St. Andrews.

I know this to be true because I've been on both sides of this adventure myself. Thirty-seven years ago, when I was a member of St. Philip's Laurel, our rector went on sabbatical. The leadership of the parish spent months planning for it. With no regular priest in residence, we saw it as an opportunity to celebrate the ministry and authority of the laity. I have to tell you that it was a great adventure. One that changed our parish. And one that changed me personally. . . .

I've also had two sabbaticals as a priest. They were wonderful gifts to me. Each time I came back refreshed and renewed - with new energy and new ideas.

I'm sure it was not a coincidence that Dina planned the start of her sabbatical for Pentecost Sunday. That's the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The amazing gift poured out on the disciples and on the people of God gathered in Jerusalem. On that day God authorized them all to go and spread

the good news of Jesus Christ. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit God gave them the power and ability and enthusiasm to do it.

Two weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, Dina authorized you to take on the responsibility of the parish during her sabbatical. By choosing Pentecost she was reminding you that you have God's authority to do this ministry. In truth, the only thing new is that you will be doing parish ministry in a way you have not done before. It is now your responsibility.

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Authority to do God's work! That's a huge responsibility and a huge gift! Let's see if we can learn anything about this from today's lessons: from Elijah, the centurion, and Paul.

The story about Elijah and the prophets of Baal is one of my favorites. Here we have Elijah, the Lord's prophet, the Lord's agent, pitted against **450** prophets of Baal. Baal was the local agricultural "god." Why were they having a contest? Because the people of God had been worshipping both Yahweh AND Baal. Elijah wanted to show them that there is no real God but Yahweh.

This story about Elijah and the prophets of Baal happens in the midst of a long drought. Worried about their future, the people of God wanted to be sure to cover all the bases. Elijah challenged their wavering. If the Lord is your God then follow

him. If Baal is your god follow Baal. The people were afraid to choose.

So, with full trust in God, Elijah went into action. He showed them that the only god with any real power over creation is Yahweh. To do that he undertook an elaborate process of building altars and cutting up animals. The prophets of Baal did every action they could to make Baal respond. It was useless. Elijah then pushed the envelope by drenching the wood around his altar 3 times. Three times! When Elijah called on God, God responded with a great fire that consumed the offering. Elijah, God's agent, God's representative, had put his trust in God and God did not fail him.

So! One of the things we learn from this is that any authority we have to DO ministry rests on our desire and ability to trust God. . . . More about that in a minute.

Next we come to the Gospel story about a centurion. One thing for sure is that this centurion, this military man, understood authority. And he obviously used it well - both with his own men and the Jewish community at Capernaum. The centurion knew he could make things happen. And he believed Jesus could make things happen. You see, the centurion understood that like himself, Jesus was also under a higher authority. And from what

he had heard, the centurion was sure Jesus could heal his slave. All Jesus had to do was speak the word. Jesus didn't even have to come under his roof to do it.

Well, such trust and confidence and honor toward Jesus elicited an amazed response from Jesus: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

So here we are again. Our ministry has authority because we trust God to uphold us and guide us and help us.

Finally we turn to Paul. It seems that the new Christian community in Galatia had been struggling with false teachers. These false teachers were trying to pervert them from the true Gospel Paul had brought them. That is, the Gospel of grace. So what does Paul do? He begins his letter by telling them whose authority he is under. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the one whom God raised from the dead. In fact, Paul believes this so fervently that he is never afraid to speak out. He willingly steps into the midst of turmoil if that is what is needed to bring God to people and people to God.

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So! Back to St. Andrew's. By whose authority do you now take on the responsibility for St. Andrew's Church during this sabbatical? God's authority. The authority given to you at

your baptism. The same authority that Dina has through her baptism.

You also have the authority given to you by Dina, your rector, to carry on this ministry in her absence. Not her sacramental ministry, but her teaching and healing and administrative and prayer ministry. One thing I am certain: she is counting on your using this authority.

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I think I can help make all this hit home by returning to my experience at St. Philip's, Laurel 37 years ago - when Sam, our rector went on Sabbatical for 3 1/2 months - at just about this same time of year.

During those months Sam asked me to head up the pastoral care team. It felt like a big request. Remember, I wasn't ordained then. Anyway, with Sam's help, our team planned how we would meet various pastoral needs. And it was a good thing we prepared, because there were many pastoral needs during that sabbatical time.

About three weeks into the sabbatical, while I was preparing Mother's Day dinner for my family, I got a phone call. Our senior warden's son had been killed in a motorcycle accident in Florida. I hung up the phone and said, "I have to go." I left my family with the mashed potatoes in process and headed out for

the 5 minute drive to Jim and Lucy's home. Here's what went through my head during that drive:

"Who am I to respond to this call? What will I say when I get there? Will Jim and Lucy welcome me? What's a 36 year old woman with no real theological training doing in such a situation as this?"

And then I remembered Marian, a woman in our Thursday morning group who said: "Thelma, I will pray for you each day during this sabbatical." And I remembered that Sam had given me authority to do this while he was gone. And that the parish had agreed. And that I was part of a team. I also knew how much I loved our Lord and how much I loved St. Philip's. So I just kept driving, trusting that God would be with me.

And soon, I was at Jim and Lucy's, going up the steps to their front porch. By the time I got to the screen door they were opening it and receiving me with open arms. . . . And then I just lived into the next hour, trusting God to give me whatever words I needed.

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Good people of St. Andrew's: that sabbatical changed St. Philip's parish. We had hoped that it would, and it did. It also changed us. We thought we knew a lot about our authority as

laity. But we came away from that experience so much wiser. So much stronger.

And that is my hope for you. I'm sure it is also Dina's hope. So claim your authority, trust that God will be with you to meet every challenge. And may God bless you in this sabbatical adventure. May God also bless Dina and her family.

The Reverend Thelma A. Smullen

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