

When a priest arrives at a new parish it is a time of discovery. It is a time to observation, and a time to learn the history of a parish, as well as the parish's hopes for the future. No matter how in depth the interviewing process is, the first few months of a priest's tenure is often a time of surprise, and amazement.

One thing I remember when I first arrived here was the lack of stained glass windows in our sanctuary. In fact, I believe there are only two stained glass windows on our whole campus. One is the rose window above the altar, the other is tucked away in our chapel. Other than that all our windows are clear, and offer a wide view of the world around us.

Stained glass windows are an interesting feature in church architecture. They usually depict biblical stories, or saints, and our hallowed heroes of the faith. They served, centuries ago, as a way of teaching the illiterate masses the core beliefs, and virtues of a faithful life.

But they also served to set sanctuaries apart from the world, as if they were a corner of heaven, separate, and sacred from the world.

Most Episcopal churches have stained glass windows. But we do not. I was puzzled by this fact when I first arrived, and wondered whether it was a worthy effort for us to pursue stained glass windows in the future. I tucked this thought away for future consideration.

Then one day I visited Trinity-by the-Cove, our parent parish, the parish that planted us as a mission to east Naples more than fifty years ago. Trinity, too, has no stained glass. As I sat in their sanctuary it made perfect sense to me.

Why would they have stained glass windows when their surroundings are so beautiful? Why would we have them when our DNA hearkens back to our roots from Trinity?

Over the years as I have served as your Rector I have grown to see the lack of stained glass windows in a different light. I see them as more than a nod to our roots. I see them as a reminder of our mission, and ministry.

Here, in moments of prayer and worship, in a sanctuary set apart from the hustle, and bustle of the world, we can still see the world about us. We can still see that, though we are members of a larger kingdom, we are still here among a broken world in need of the love of Christ.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? This is the fourth query of the questions of holy obligation in our Baptismal Covenant. As we are welcoming new members into the body of Christ, when we renew our commitments to live as Christ's own forever, which we will do on Easter Sunday, we are called to a life of action. We are particularly called to seek those who need our help, and to serve those in need.

But we are not called to do so out of a sense of superior sympathy, as if those we serve can only survive because of our gracious, most holy help. Instead we are called to seek, and serve others as equals, as fully human, as Christ's own beloved.

It is a sobering idea. Loving others as we love ourselves. It calls us simultaneously to a strong sense of self-worth, and a just as strong sense of humility. We are no better, we are no worse than anyone God places before us. We are in this together, and are called, indeed commissioned, to serve others.

At the end of our service there is something called the Dismissal. Our deacon, or when Mary is not here, I call out a prescribed set of words. It is more than a way of saying, "Okay, the service is over, you can go now." Instead it is a commissioning.

In the Prayer Book there are four options for the Dismissal. Three of them have a clear sense of action, of mission. I chose long ago to use one of those phrases every Sunday.

Frankly, in most areas of my life I tend to take things as they come. Except for in this room. There is virtually nothing I do in this room that has not been seriously considered, and decided how I will perform these acts of worship. From what I keep on the altar during the Eucharist, to where I stand when pronouncing the absolution, to how I dismiss the faithful at the end of the service, I have deliberated on these actions many times, for many years.

Early in my ministry I decided to use just one sentence of dismissal so I would never be flabbergasted, or mixed up concerning which to use. I remember considering carefully which one to use. I settled on the sentence, "Go in peace to leave and serve the Lord."

I did so because I believe it encapsulates what Jesus expects of each of us, everyday. We are called to go, to step forth in active faith, bringing the Gospel into our lives, and the lives of others.

We are called to go in peace. We are to be the embodiment of a world reconciled to Christ. We are called to live as redeemed people, at peace with our God, but also bringing that peace, even that sense of concord, into a broken, and divided world.

We are called to love and serve the Lord. I consider those two verbs, love and serve in this context to be the two sides of the same coin. What good is it to love the Lord if we are not serving the Lord? What good is it to serve the Lord if we do not love the Lord? Can you even do one without the other?

Loving means serving. Serving, truly serving, with honor and respect, means loving. The two cannot be separated.

So, at the end of our service we are called to mission. We are called to action. What is your response?

According to the Prayer Book it is one of thanksgiving, "Thanks be to God." is our reply. Consider that.

We are charged with a huge responsibility. We are commissioned with the task of going into the world, bearing the love of God, and sharing that love in thought, word, and deed with all those around us.

Our response is not, "Yes, master." It is not a timid agreement, as in, "Okay, we will try." The answer is one of praise. Thanks be to God.

Thank you, Lord, for calling us into ministry with you. Thank you that you trust us enough, even knowing our foibles and weaknesses, that you place the future of your kingdom in our hands. Thank you that you have given us a challenge that calls us to our best every day, and with every breath.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? We answer this question each Sunday with our Dismissal. Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord. And the faithful say....