

Sermon: "The Order of the Laity: Being the Church"

10Pentecost, Sunday, August 1, 2021

Preached by Carol V. Oppel at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Austin, TX

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry ..."

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AMEN

There were days during my high school years that were awkward and painful. Probably most of us experienced some of those feelings, as do our young people now in high school. Back there in Tallahassee, I rarely felt good about myself. I was anxious I'd be seen as out of step with the in-crowd if I said and did what I honestly felt. My insecurities ran deep.

So it was with anxiety and curiosity that I attended my 25th high school reunion. We were living in Charlotte by then. I had not seen classmates in years. I obsessed over what to wear; starved myself to drop some pounds.

The reunion was held at the Capital City Country Club, a small town, faux colonial building, with a pool where our children had learned to swim when my husband was editor of the local newspaper. During the opening cocktail party, I spotted Ken, the golden-haired god I had lusted after and who had always ignored me; some "cool girls" who had been inducted in secret night raids to their homes into the Civinettes and the Anchor Club, what my mother called "little sororities." The day after, they would show up at school in their new club regalia. An older member had whispered in my ear: "I tried so hard, I really did, but you just didn't make it." And there was Karol Anne, the May Queen, who would with her court of attendants, elected from our all-white high school, rule over Tallahassee's annual antebellum-style May Day festival in a downtown park, under giant live oaks draped with Spanish moss. I was not elected to be a member of her court. Yet, my mother insisted that I travel to a bridal shop in Jacksonville with her, and with Karol Anne and her mother to pick out her May Queen dress. That trip was painful.

So it was with relief that across the room I saw Sarianne Grannison. Our eyes met, and we crossed the room to hug each other. We had shared Spanish classes. Together, we excelled. She was beautiful; with large brown eyes and wavy curls of shiny brown hair. I told Sarianne that she was as beautiful as ever; that I had envied her in high school. I considered myself a social misfit, and had wanted to be like her. She threw her head back and laughed. She told me that back then, she had felt like the nerdiest of nerds, thought I had it all together, and had wanted to be like me.

Our serendipitous conversation was healing and redemptive. Painful, lingering memories were laid aside.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians recalls my conversation with Sarianne in 1984. Paul lists Christ's gifts to his people, the laity. The word laity comes from the Greek word *laos*, (*lau-us*), meaning people of God. Christ's gifts: to serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastors.

Sarianne and I were each a pastor to the other. We spoke honestly about ourselves, and were loved in return.

We are members of the Order of the Laity of the Episcopal Church. As I believe my encounter was with Sarianne, we are called to be Christ to one another, within these parish walls, and in the world outside. Our spiritual journey, simply put, is to become the child God made us to be, and to do the work he has called us to do.

The laity is one of the four orders of the ministries of the Church. They are defined in our Book of Common Prayer: "The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons."

Putting lay persons first was no accident. I'm quite certain that lay persons are listed first because without us, lay persons – the Order of the Laity – there would be no Church. No Church.

As baptized Christians, we are — the Order of the Laity — who the Apostle Peter wrote about in his First Epistle to churches in Asia Minor, ". . . a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Adopted as Christ's own forever at our baptisms, we are redeemed, forgiven, and marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. Through Christ, we are endowed with courage and sustenance at our Eucharist, fed for his work to be done.

It is imperative for our generation of the laity today to recognize that both within and outside our parish, living as we do in a fractured, deeply divided nation, that there has never been a more critical period, at least in my lifetime, for the laity of the Episcopal Church to be living testaments to our Baptismal Covenant: to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Examples of the work of the laity are readily available in the parish's organized life. Father Zac envisioned a party for the neighborhood, and in November, 2019, more than 100 St. Mark's green-shirted volunteers—can we call them evangelists?—welcomed the Barton Hills community to the St. Mark's 60th Anniversary Block Party, with music,

games, and food. It was a classic example of evangelism, and a partnership of clergy and laity.

I wonder how many of today's parishioners were first introduced to St. Mark's that day in our parking lot overflowing with families, friendship and food.

And the teachers: When I'm here on a weekday, the walk from the parking lot often includes hearing the spirited, frolicking voices of children playing at recess from St. Mark's Episcopal Day School. Our school is a nurturing community where children are led to experience and develop compassion, empathy and respect for one another. At chapel once a week, children hear of God's love, mercy, and justice for all people.

Prophets: There are prophets among us who proclaim the will of God for our parish. Some have deep roots, many going back to our parish's formation, and can help drive us forward by drawing on our parish's history. Deep in our DNA is the inclusion of vibrant, active, devoted, and committed laity in the worship and work of the church.

Pastors: Some people among us have the ability to sense when people are suffering. They are the pastors, gifted with the ability to encourage, empathize, and help light a pathway to peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Just one word can heal. For those who grieve the loss of a life partner, or the shock of a terminal cancer diagnosis, they can be a silent companion, with no words needed.

And one among us prepares the church for worship, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of liturgy. This talented member of our laity helped raise several generations of acolytes, and even treads on ground where only the brave would go: Advising the Altar Guild. But our laity's use of our gifts for ministry also extends beyond the parish, sometimes continents away. Their ministries are also rich and often colorful.

We have among us devoted women who serve the homeless, physicians and healthcare workers who serve the poor, lawyers who assist migrants, linguists who translate for those new to our country, journalists who give voice to those left out, and public servants for whom "service" is a part of their job description.

- St. Mark's Shower Ministry, housed at the Trinity Center at St. David's Episcopal Church, reaches beyond our parish walls to serve the homeless. On Tuesday mornings, a team of St. Mark's women provide homeless women with private showers, and our parishioners' generously donate toiletries, clean underwear, and socks. These women serve with respect for the dignity of the homeless women who live on the margins of society.

- One parishioner is a Family and Preventive Medicine physician, with training in Forced Migration and Refugee Medicine. A member of our Mission Advisory Board, this lay person is liaison to Warm Heart International, that provides aid to developing communities worldwide, and is involved with the Episcopal Church's work in the Diocese of Malawi. This committed lay person is also a primary care clinician with Austin's CommUnityCare, which serves primarily Medicaid and uninsured populations.
- A mother and teenager team, members of our Mission Advisory Board, are liaisons to Trinity Center. They collect and deliver clothing for the homeless. For the mother, the ministry is a way to serve with her actions and not only with monetary donations. For the teenager, being involved provides a sense of purpose.
- Another faithful lay person is our Mission Advisory Board's liaison to the Welcome Table, which serves residents of Southeast Austin with food staples, fresh produce, and diapers. This member of the laity told me: "It is enormously satisfying to do what we are called to do by our faith."

There are many such stories of the laity at St. Mark's. The selflessness, integrity, and commitment of the laity represent the faithful use of God's gifts to us.

I want to emphasize here that all of these lay ministries are done in partnership with our faithful clergy. Just as Father Zac opened the door to neighborhood evangelism at the Block Party, Mother Mary coordinates our service to the broader community.

A longtime, active member of the laity of our parish best sums up what we do. "Almost every member plays a role in lay ministry in the parish. Some internally serving the parish family, and some playing an active part in outreach. There are some who are visible and some doing important things in the shadows." Wise words from a very faithful parishioner.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, be all might, majesty, dominion, and power, now and forever more. AMEN