

2005 National Conference on Tentmaking/Bi-vocational Ministry

Friday — Sunday, November 4-6, 2005
Saint Mary of the Lake Conference Center, Mundelein, IL

Edited by Davis Fisher

Saturday Morning, November 5, 2005

Sermon at Morning Worship

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A cat is chasing a mouse across an inner-city street and the mouse jumps into a pothole. He cowers there in terror and he hears the cat up above him going “meow, meow” and so the mouse burrows even farther into a little corner of the pothole. A few minutes go by and then the mouse hears “woof, woof.” He breathes a sigh of relief and he figures it’s now safe to come out. He comes out and he’s scooped up by the cat. The cat holds him up before he puts him in his mouth and he says to the mouse “my friend, if you’re going to survive in the city, you’ve got to be bi-lingual.”

Now I tell you that story, because in many ways I think all of us who do ministry as ordained people in the church are bi-lingual by definition. We are people who live in the church and in the world, and I think that if we’re going to be effective in what we do, we have to be able to not speak in code, in the code of the church, but actually be able to use the world’s language to address the world’s needs and the world’s concerns. We have to be able to bring that church culture into the world and bring that world’s culture into the church. I think that’s the vocation of all church leaders in this time in history.

But I think it’s especially the vocation of people who are self-supporting in that ministry. I was not employed in the church for several years and there was a way in which during that time of my ministry I understood the issues that people bring to faith communities differently than I do as a when I am embedded in the system and am on the payroll. So I start with the fact that if we are all called to be God’s witnesses in this period, we’re all called to be bi-lingual. But those of us who do that not on the payroll of the institution but who do that with other means of earning our living, do that in a bi-lingual way and a very special way.

Having said that, usually my sermons have three points, but this morning I’m going to give you a break and I’m only going to make two. And the two points have to do with the two readings (from this worship service) and I want to frame them this way. I don’t know what Jim Lemler talked about last night; you’re in danger of having two people from the same institution come and talk to you and we may be saying the same thing or we may be saying entirely different things. I’ll find out, I guess, at the break. We live right now – and especially in my work at a seminary – we live right now in the church in this bi-lingual tension of whether this church is a movement or an institution. I was raised – and Bill (Persell) and I went to the seminary a few years apart from each other – but I was raised at the very tail-end of the kind of comfortable, cultural presumption that when one graduated from seminary, one was going to enter on a career path and that we had a good sociological definition of what the career path was.

So I would say that at the beginning of my ordained ministry in 1976, I entered with a fairly comfortable sense of what life in the institutional church was going to be about and what my ministry in that church was going to look like and what my career path was going to look like, especially as I had been influenced over the years by reading the Jesus Seminar people and especially John Dominic Crosson. And just the experiences of being a Christian person in a kind of post-modern, post-Christendom age, I have continually been brought back and converted to the idea that the church both originally and now is more of a movement than it is an institution... and that we are followers of Jesus and sometimes we're called to out that counter-culturally and maybe even counter-institutionally. As my students would remind me when we talk about this at Seabury in the Gospel Mission class, that neat dichotomy of movement and institution is probably just a little too neat and a little too easy.

There are always – because we're human – going to be institutional components to our movement nature and there is always – if we are prophetic and accountable – going to be a movement status to our institutional nature. When I was in seminary, I was one of those people who thought, in the late 60's, that we should sell all the buildings and give them away and use that money for ministry to the poor. And I have come to realize over the last 20-30 years of my life that that was a romantic idea. It wasn't a bad idea, but it was an idea that assumed that human beings don't need buildings and structures and systems in which to encounter the Gospel. So if we are really faithful to what Jesus is calling us to do, we are going to both have the movement fervor and the kind of counter-cultural energy of movement people.

However, living in a real world and human nature being what it is, we're going to need structures and institutions in which to live out that movement. And that is why I think I asked us to read Paul's reflections in First Corinthians, Chapter Nine about what it means to be a self-supporting ordained minister. You're not the first people in the Christian tradition to do this, you know. Paul was a tentmaker and this is how, of course, Paul earned his living. And Paul's argument in First Corinthians, Chapter Nine (and, remember, he's writing to a grumpy group of people who have been at odds with each other and have kind of gone off to somebody a little more charismatic than Paul after he left) is, "You know, I could have just demanded that you pay me for my services but I didn't do that. And I didn't do that precisely so that I would have a kind of freedom. I would not be obligated to you financially and I could speak to you with the kind of freedom and authority that not being beholden to you financially would give me.

As we think about what it means to be both a real-world institution and a movement of people following Jesus and bringing about the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, it seems to me that we need to think along the lines that Paul thinks about this morning. We all deserve our wages. Ordained ministry is important and it's important to the church and in some sense we could all rest on our deserving of those wages as what we're owed. But the fact that some people choose vocationally to give what they do to the church is, I think, a sign of vitality and authenticity, just as Paul could keep the Corinthians honest by not demanding money from them and so be able to sort of speak the truth to them from the outside.

I think one of the creative possibilities of people who are self-supporting in the ordained ministry of the church is to be able to be those ironic voices who can say to the church what it needs to hear but sometimes those of us who care at least as much as for the church pension fund as we do for the Nicene Creed may not often be able to hear, especially as our 30 years of service comes closer.

Secondly and finally, there's Jesus in John's Gospel, talking about himself as the vine and us as the branches. Paul's metaphor for that – it actually isn't a metaphor in his own thinking – is that we are the Body of Christ, that we are Christ embodied and present in the world and that what we do, that we are not only sent by Christ, but that in some way that's quite real, that we embody Christ in the world. What we do in fact is literally carrying out what Jesus was doing in his work.

I think our challenge together – both as those of us who make our livings institutionally and for those of us who make our livings elsewhere and who give our ministries to the church – I think our challenge together is to think of what we do as not just institutional volunteerism, or being docents for Jesus, but rather what you do is actually missional movement work in service of an institution that will always need to have an institutional frame and focus because we're real, finite, flawed people living in a real, finite, flawed world. That institution – with your help and your energy – can be not just an institution but can be an institution in the service of a movement. I think that's the kind of bi-lingual thinking that all of us Christian people, both paid and self-supporting, need to be in service of and it's for that bi-lingual vision of what we can and should be about that we proceed in this Eucharist to give thanks. Amen.

