

Year A, Proper 26, October 30, 2011

NT Wright, the noted New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, in England, tells a story which could just as easily have happened to David or me when we were younger. *“The man in the camping shop was good at his job. ‘This is the kind of tent you’ll need,’ he said. ‘It’ll last through all weathers, enough room for all your kit, easy to put up.’ Gratefully, I added it to the pile of maps, socks and waterproof clothing. Then it was time for the boots. ‘These are the best there are,’ he said. ‘Solid sole, dependable uppers, support for the ankles, walk through mud or grass or pebbles or hard rock. Just the job.’ I agreed. Then we came to the cooking equipment. Again he knew just what I needed: the stove, the fuel, the storage boxes. And the same with the food itself: packs of long-lasting but nourishing food and drink. I’d have to get water from day to day (or refill the bottles from mountain streams), but here were a couple of bottles to start me off. Then it was the sleeping bag, then it was something to burn to keep insects away, then it was a [flashlight] and an emergency first aid kit. And so on. Finally it was the pack. ‘This should be big enough,’ he said, lifting down a simply enormous [backpack]. ‘And it’s waterproof too, and, yes, it sits nicely on the shoulders, that one.’*

*“As I paid the bill, his assistant kindly and carefully placed all the items into the pack itself. It rested, invitingly, on the counter beside the till, full of my new [vacation] lifestyle. I tried to pick it up and swing it around on to my back, casually, as though I did this sort of thing every day. An awkward moment. I changed my mind and turned around, away from the counter, bent my knees a little to get to the right level, and inched backward towards the huge pack. The assistant helped me get my arms into the straps. I straightened my knees and smiled bravely, wondering if I would get out of the shop, let alone a hundred miles through the mountains.*

*“‘What sort of vacations do you have, then?’ I asked the expert salesman. ‘Oh, I just go to the seaside,’ he said. ‘Bad back. Can’t carry stuff like that.’ By the time I reached the end of the street I was thinking of the scribes and Pharisees.”*

These words are Tom Wright’s way of introducing today’s gospel reading in his Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, where we find Jesus saying that the scribes and Pharisees “do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”

No one wants to carry an over-heavy burden.

This is not only true of backpackers, but also of anyone who seeks to practice his or her religion. It’s one of the reasons why some of the earliest followers of Jesus transferred their allegiance from the Jewish synagogue to the Jewish Christian Church. They were looking to be relieved of unnecessary burdens and to be empowered for life and service.

In today’s passage, the first century Jewish community is characterized in the following way: First, it was presided over by a power elite, the scribes and the Pharisees. Their power derived from the knowledge they possessed. They were the experts on Torah, the Law of Moses. They knew what was what. The common people were not without knowledge, but they didn’t possess enough of it to be in charge.

Second, the power elite imposed burdens on the common folk. The common folk supported those in power through their tithes and offerings, and the money didn’t go to serve the poor or widows or orphans. Rather, the scribes and Pharisees, lived a wealthy lifestyle, in fancy real estate for the time, eating and entertaining with fancy meals. Those in power knew all about every little thing that’s contained in the Law of Moses. Because they had the leisure that comes with power, they could follow much of the legal detail that everyday working people could not. They could acquire status by doing all the little things, even when they ignored the big ones: like justice, like caring for the widow and the stranger.

Third, the power people used their status to gain human approval. They dressed in a way

that said: “I am religious!” They claimed the best seats at public gatherings, and enjoyed being referred to as Rabbi, as one with the power of knowledge, and status in the community.

Fourth, they placed themselves at the top of a human hierarchy, in which they claimed the position of teacher and father and instructor (“master” in older translations). Others were to be their students, and their “children,” and under their authority.

The structure of relationships in the early church directly challenged the system of first century Judaism. First, instead of a power elite, power was distributed. All were brothers and sisters, baptized members of a body in which all were fundamentally equal. There were different responsibilities and functions in that early community, but there were to be no differences in status. All knew that everyone’s salvation came from one source: the saving act of God in Jesus Christ.

Second, instead of burdens being imposed by one group on another, burdens were shared. Everyone tithed to the work of the community, not to support the lifestyle of few, but to reach out to the poor and needy. All were equally claimed by the love of God in Jesus. Leaders of the community exercised leadership for the benefit of the community, and everyone participated for the sake of the family of God.

Third, instead of seeking human approval, the task of the entire Church was to seek God’s approval. Every ministry, every service was to be performed for the sake of the God who loves each and every member: the rich and the poor, the schooled and the unschooled, the sophisticated and the plain.

Finally, every human hierarchy was subsumed under the divine hierarchy. In the most basic sense, there was to be only one Teacher, Jesus himself. Only one Father, the God who made heaven and earth, the one whom Jesus referred to as “Father.” Only one Master, the Messiah, the Christ of God.

The description of the Early church could be a description of any new movement or any re-newed movement, and indeed, the renewal of the Episcopal Church over that last thirty years has been characterized by a shift from a model of “ministry to,” to a model of “ministry with.” It’s a shift not unlike the shift that took place in Matthew’s life and times. Some of the details look like this:

In the “ministry to” model, priests and bishops minister to the rest of the church. Most of us know what this looks like. It’s the priest’s job to perform all of the really significant functions, like leading worship, and preaching, and visiting the sick, and educating adults and children. (Oh, it was OK for ordinary folk to teach Sunday School, but when it came to confirmation preparation, they moved aside so the really knowledgeable person, the priest, could take over and get things right.)

In “the ministry with” model, priests, deacons, and bishops continue to minister, but they no longer have a monopoly on ministry. Listen to the response to the Catechism question: “Who are the ministers of the Church?” It goes like this: “The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.” Listen to that again: “The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.” Who comes first? Lay persons! That’s right. Because everyone, by virtue of their baptism, is first a lay person – even people like me, who sometimes wear special clergy collars or vestments. “Ministry with” is mutual ministry, in which the gifts of all the people of God are valued and lifted up, for the good of the Church and the world.

So, here at St. John’s we have baptized people who carry out a wide array of ministries: Providing hospitality by preparing and serving meals at the Friday Friendship Meal. Supporting the development of a Phase Two Annex program for women coming out of Hope House. Supporting the Community Healing Center by providing office space in our building. Providing our building for use by 12 Step Groups and various community classes or groups. Sponsoring Movie nights for our Mission Forward. Preparing the church building for worship services.

Proclaiming words of scripture and leading words of prayer. Playing music that inspires. Leading the singing of the assembly. Ministering communion. Bringing communion to the sick and shut in. Praying with the sick. Lighting candles, carrying crosses, and swinging incense pots. Maintaining parish buildings and grounds.

We also have a baptized person called to preside at the celebration of the Eucharist and we have a baptized person who leads the proclamation of the Gospel and encourages others in service. Floyd and I are referred to as a deacon and a priest, but make no mistake about it, that we are first and foremost, baptized Christians. We are not the only ones who can lead worship or preach. Nor are we the only ones called to preach or pray or offer prayer for healing.

All of this describes a shift. It is a shift: from ministry as status to ministry as function. From a focus on an individual to a focus on community. From a system that is professionally regulated to one that is Spirit driven. From pedagogy (one person has knowledge that is shared with all the rest) to “synagogy” (every person has knowledge that can be shared with others). From exclusive boundaries to inclusive outreach. From a top down organization to one that is circular. From a church that stands still to a church that is on the move. From a church that depends on a few generous people, to where everyone seeks to tithe and turn over their resources to God.

All of this can lead to a church where burdens are more equally shared, a church where one is confident that all of us are loved by God in the end. This is a church that can move forward with confidence in God, who through the Holy Spirit, gives us all that we need. And who helps to share with a world in need.

The Reverend Canon Meredith Hunt

(With substantial contribution from The Reverend David Lillivs this week)