

*October 5, 2008*

*Matthew 21:33-46*

*Church of the Intercession, 155th & Broadway, NY*

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In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you for the invitation to be with you on this day. Congratulations on the 161<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of ministry of the people of this church in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is your Homecoming event, any homecoming, but particularly the homecoming of a Church community, brings with it joy and reflections of times past. A homecoming reminds us of the deep value of relationships, relationships with each other, with the Body of Christ gathered together and with God. Homecoming makes us appreciate all that we have, and reminds us that *all* of what we have comes of God. Today we appreciate each other, this building and the beautiful ways in which God is honored in the adornment of the building. We thank God for giving us these gifts.

Understanding that all things come from God is a tricky concept. But it is a concept critically important to our faith. It is a tricky concept because we are often lulled into thinking that *we* create, and on a secondary level we do. But what we *use* to create is God-given: if we are artists we use materials – paints derived from earth's compounds, brushes from animal hair and synthetics. If we are musicians, we use instruments or our voices. If we are mathematicians, we use theories and constructs (after all those are already there, created by God, we just discover them).

What comes from God is **the** real-time, never-ending list. **Everything** comes from God. In today's world of superheroes, God is the ultimate superhero, in fact God is such a superhero that God created all the other superheros. God's superhero name could be: "The Originator".

And today we gather to celebrate all that God has given us. We come home to celebrate in this beautiful God-given church. We come home to celebrate in the context of this community and in the context of the larger community of which we are a part, where, in this country and all across the globe, like us today, in this place, others are saying "Glory to God in the highest".

I want to be sure that you know, that the Church of the Intercession and all the people who worship here are a special collection of God's people, and together, **we are all** part of a larger church family called the Episcopal Church. We are part of an even larger family, called the Anglican Communion. And, most importantly, we look forward to spending eternity with an even **larger** family known as the communion of saints in the kingdom of God. Some of our loved ones are already there, waiting for us to come home. As we hear in the Gospel reading from Matthew, "The kingdom of God will be given to a

people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” And so, getting to the kingdom of God is the ultimate homecoming.

So while we are here, what does it mean to us to be the people of God. What does it mean to know that we are God’s own? And to those of us who are lay people, what does it mean particularly to us? What difference does it make? Who really cares?

I think God cares. I think God cares because God keeps building up the numbers of lay people. There are a lot of us. There are lots more laity in TEC than there are bishops and deacons and priests. I think God calls us, just like God calls people to be priests and deacons and bishops. But God calls more of us because we are the backbone of the Church. God calls more of us because we have lots and lots of work to do. In some sense, God calls us to be the “heavy lifters”. We are the ministers of the Church. It even says so in our catechism, on page 855. Our catechism in our prayer book, the Book of Common Prayer answers the question, “Who are the Ministers of the Church” by saying, “the ministers of the church are the laity, the bishops and the clergy.”

Have you ever thought of yourself as a “minister”? Well, you are, we are. The fact that the laity and the clergy and the bishops are all commissioned by God as ministers is an important cornerstone of our Church. And if that isn’t enough to electrify us, the catechism, in our own book of common prayer answers the question, “What is the ministry of the laity?” with these words:

“The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.” That is what we are supposed to do.

Let me be very clear here. First we are baptized and we make promises to God in the context of our Christian community. You know those promises, don’t you? If you don’t, be sure you do before you make these promises next time when your baptismal covenant is renewed. By our baptism, reinforced in our Catechism and by the way we are governed as a church, all of us are invited into ministry, mission and service. We are all charged to do the work God has given us to do. **All** of us have the responsibility for God’s reconciling work in the world.

Now, not only do we know WHAT we are supposed to do, but God has set us up to do it. God has set us up in our church, first by our baptism and then by the way we govern ourselves. Our church, the Episcopal church, is set up to enable our ministry.

Let me give you some examples, using the metaphor of throwing a pebble in pond- you know how the pebble goes in and makes a splash and then the rings of water go out smaller first, then bigger and bigger.

This church, Church of the Intercession, has a vestry or a bishop’s committee, right? With the help of the bishop’s vicar, the Chief Operating Officer so to speak, the bishop’s

committee “manages” (of course we know it is much more than simple “management” it is the day to day business, but it is also the response to the call of God) anyway, the bishop’s committee “manages” the ministry of the congregation. The Bishop’s vicar has certain responsibilities, but he cannot do all God’s work by himself. Now I am not talking about only what goes on in this building. I am talking about God’s work in the world. That is what we are supposed to do. How many times a day do we have opportunities to do God’s work? At our own jobs, - We lay people have to see our jobs as our MINISTRY. Just like the vicar’s ministry is with you, your ministry is with your colleagues at work, with your families, with people on the street. That’s why there are so many of us. We have a LOT of work to do.

It is us, along with the others called to the ministry who are the workers in a vineyard that belongs to God.

Okay – so back to church governance and how it works to enable us to do our ministries. So the bishop’s committee has work to do to govern the congregation. But how do they know what to do? They talk to people. They talk to the members of the congregation. They are in RELATIONSHIP with the members of the congregation. They are elected by the congregation.

Now, the congregation, Church of the Intercession, is part of a diocese. The Diocese of New York. The bishop and the standing committee, and the executive council of the diocese, “manage” the ministry of the diocese. Again, I use the term “manage” to incorporate the day to day business as well as discerning and responding to God’s call).

And who are the people who do this ministry? Who are the ones who manage the diocese? They are the bishop(s) of the diocese, who by the way are ELECTED by representatives from ALL the congregations in the diocese. Who elects them, you do. The standing committee of the diocese and the executive council of the diocese are lay people and clergy of the diocese, who also are elected by representatives from all the congregations in the diocese at the diocesan annual convention.

Stay with me here: why am I telling you this? I am telling you this because you, and me, each one of us who says “yes” to God and to each other, each one of us who is baptized and repeats our baptismal vows, making promises to God and each other, has a church structure that allow us to take our place in the governance of the church. But not only that, and more importantly, the structure of our church is set up to value and use the gifts of all the baptized.

So the pebble in the pond is the bishop’s committee, the next ripple is the diocesan convention.

So now the bigger ripple in the pond. Once every three years the Episcopal Church gathers together at a General Convention. From the time our Church was founded in 1785 we have met together to make decisions about the life of God’s church. Originally, when we met in the late 1700s our own country was just being formed. The way our church is governed was modeled on the way our government is modeled. At General Convention,

every three years, our church meets in two “houses”, much like the United States Government meets in two houses.

The House of Bishops, is composed of about 250 bishops. The presiding officer of the House of Bishops is the Presiding Bishop. The Presiding Bishop is elected by the House of bishops and confirmed by The House of Deputies. The House of Deputies is composed of 4 clergy and 4 lay people elected from each of the 110 dioceses plus the Episcopal Churches in Europe. The presiding officer Of the House of Deputies is elected by the clergy and lay deputies from each diocese. But the important thing is that the General Convention is a body of ELECTED people (clergy and laity in the House of Deputies and bishops in the House of Bishops (remember our bishops are elected by us).

Now the Anglican communion.

Once every 10 years the Archbishop of Canterbury invites bishops from around the Anglican Communion to a conference called The Lambeth Conference. This conference was held this summer and most of the bishops from the Episcopal church were invited and most attended. Most of the bishops from the rest of the Anglican Communion were invited and most attended. From what I have been told, the event enabled bishops to explore in some very helpful ways, their role as bishops, to begin to develop new relationships with other bishops in the Anglican Communion, to build on old relationships. The conference seems to have been a good conference for the bishops. It was also expensive.

I am also told that a bookmark, created by the Episcopal church was one of the “hottest items” at the conference. Why? The bookmark was printed with the baptismal covenant found in our book of common prayer. The majority of the churches in the Anglican Communion do not have a baptismal covenant. Our church has relationships with Anglicans around the world that enable us to be in partnership in ministry together. Like the congregation, and the diocese and the Episcopal Church’s General Convention are all about relationship, so it is with the Anglican Communion.

So you see, the way that we govern ourselves is not only democratic, our governance supports our foundational belief that all of the baptized have been given gifts by God and that those God-given gifts are there for us to use in God’s work of reconciliation in the world. Now God gives us everything: all things come of God. We have all that we need to do the work God calls us to do.

Well, Homecoming. So look around. Open up your senses to the fragrances, the sounds, hear the music, look into the faces of the people of God gathered here. Look at the beauty that surrounds us. Home sings us of sweet things.

The pebble in the pond is us – our vestries and bishops committees, the ripples are the diocese and the General Convention, and to the degree of relationships, the Anglican Communion. And the last ripple, finally, when our gifts have been used to the glory of the Originator, to the glory of God on this earth, finally, when we breathe our last, we

come home to God. Our homecoming is to the kingdom of God as promised, the kingdom of God will be given to us, a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.  
*Amen.*