

Ordination of Glenn Rohrer

“Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Glenn, my friend, and soon to be colleague.... and bishop Duncan, first let me thank you for the opportunity to preach on this auspicious occasion, an occasion that is quite literally a new day for the church, and a new day for you Glenn more than you can know right now. I have memories resting here at Holy Cross. It is the church in which I was ordained to the diaconate some seven years ago....and it is also the church in which my dear friend Betts Slingluff lived out his priesthood of less than two years... dying suddenly and quite unexpectedly at age 46...His wife Margaret is our daughter's godmother, and more than that a very dear friend to this day...so a piece of my life is here in this place....this place in the small Episcopal world....You know the not so old joke: That really the Episcopal Church is roughly forty people or so who just keep showing up at the same meetings! Small.... but mighty... and the church is amid great change... as it always has been, but perhaps now at a more rapid pace.

In the nineteen fifties in the Episcopal Church a term for the church was coined by then presiding bishop Henry Knox Sherrill that the church was a “hospital for sinners”....a sad coinage, but understandable following the catastrophic human disaster called World War two in which seventy million people were killed, in the most violent century ever known....people “harassed and helpless”, as Matthew puts it, on a global scale....Churches filled to capacity; new churches by the dozens were constructed during the fifties for comfort and solace, seeking to make sense of the violence and evil rife in our world. Some perhaps asking the eons old question: Where were you God? But those were the days in which for most, other than the theological Academy, we allowed God to remain aloof from our questioning, aloof from the day to day of our world....Karl Barth, the great theologian of the 20th century, referred to God vis-à-vis the violence of the twentieth century as “wholly other”....Inside our proverbial red doors of our churches we said our creeds, prayed our prayers, heard sermons about the love of God and the sin of man, and continued to stay out of the brute business of the world around us. Many felt the church should keep to itself (as some still do), a sacred shelter from the storms of the profane....That church is the church people are leaving...that church is dying and dying fast.

Through the passionate activism and upheaval within and of the socioeconomic and political order of the sixties, the Episcopal Church and

others began changing, to the joy of some and to the chagrin of others. Many churches awoke to the needs of the world around them and spoke out for matters such as civil rights for African Americans, for the rights of women, for a just society in which the poor and disenfranchised were given a chance at dignity. Diana Butler Bass, church historian and keen observer of the post modern church, writes that the old hospital for sinners paradigm is no longer tenable....that seekers of God and Truth not only want meaning but relevance too....and they want agency...agency, the power to make a difference in our world; that the believer in the so-called emerging church is not just believer only but one who lives a life in dynamic community that changes the world for the better....that is agency...The church no longer guardian of an ensconced belief system....but a gathered and growing fellowship that seeks to enact in our world the Gospel imperative of taking care of our least, bringing about a society, which is now via post-modern technology a global enterprise....bringing about a society that is just and non-violent in which the rubric for human life is dignity and well being.

The gospel reading for this morning in which Jesus is giving marching orders to his disciples is preceded by four acts of healing....that is no literary accident...In the passage we just heard read Jesus we are told continues his mission of healing among the helpless and harassed...moved by compassion, an image of the church, moved by compassion....and then bids his followers to do the same using the metaphor of harvest, which to any Jewish hearer worth his or her salt, would evoke the idea of the end times, the final judgment, the consummation of heaven and earth in which God would be all in all....but Matthew is saying that that time is now, not a future event, not a hereafter reality....but that this kingdom...this gracious commonweal of God is maturing, ripening as we speak....that the harvest is plentiful now....not in some otherworldly place but here in the day to day, ripe for harvest.....contingent only upon the laborers who bear healing in their hands to make it so, That's us.....In short Matthew is saying God needs us in the bringing of this new order, we co-creators in this new creation that breaks upon us...Matthew is speaking of a church whose business is the business of the world.....Matthew is speaking of the new creation healed from despair and helplessness and shame...and made whole...but contingent to *our* labor as the redeemed of Christ, empowered in our Christ-likeness.....Our Christ-likeness, the way God sees us...We have been taught that we are able to see God in the person of Jesus...I think the converse is true that God sees us, the human community through the person of Jesus... To bear God's love to the world no less than the Christ, brothers and sisters, is that for which we were born. It is our singular purpose. All else is dross.

Now I've most often heard this passage preached here in our evangelical neck of the woods...that we the laborers, the generations of disciples are to go out and bring other souls into the fellowship of believers...individual souls, the fruit ready for harvest...and that theme certainly exists in this Gospel....you remember later in 28 Matthew exhorts in the words of Jesus the community to go out and baptize and make disciples...but this passage today is something different...Matthew throughout this gospel speaks of the fruits (Karpos) of the kingdom....and for Matthew the fruits of the kingdom, the fruits of God's gracious commonweal....for Matthew the fruits of the mutual and collaborative commonweal are the outward and visible signs of God's reign in earth, fruits not representing individual souls, but fruits signs of the commonweal being manifested ...the fruits for Matthew are the signs of the commonweal of God coming into this world...the fruit of compassion...the fruit of mercy... the fruit of justice, the fruit of well being, the fruit of healing....the Laborers of God are to gather the harassed and helpless ones of our world into the arms of mercy and compassion into the arms of justice, into the arms of non-violence...in short into the arms of salvation...salvation not something for us to possess for our own personal good (as we are taught in our culture on the so-called Christian airwaves)...but salvation something we bear to the world, salvation something we give away... salvation is for the harassed and helpless we harvest from the jaws of degradation, ill health, violence and evil...salvation meaning dignity and well being brought to bear where there is shame and hurt and sorrow....and the time for such harvesting has come upon us dear friends of God.....not unlike the church in Matthew's day... we a church sojourning in a broken and despairing world...a world harassed and helpless....and by church I mean all people of faith and conscience...all over the planet.

Glenn, my friend and brother....these are incredibly exciting times to be a priest of the church, exciting times for clergy and laity to be about the business of the church....and it is a dangerous time to be in the church, especially in a church that has opened its doors to the world....making the world's business our business (and some won't want to be a part; but some will be overjoyed to be a part).....remember before we were priests, back in the day... back in the early days of the church we were presbyters, a good word to remember... which our translation "elder" doesn't do the word justice....in the Koine Greek the translation means something like... experienced, wise elder....one who is raised up by the faithful to teach and empower them for this vocation of harvesting the fruits of the kingdom... and then celebrating this vocation of the commonweal in word and

sacrament... and in our Anglican tradition doing that beautifully.....You are to lead wisely your people as imaginatively and artfully and courageously as you can into the dark corners of our world as healers wherein live the harassed and the helpless.....the unsaved, and by unsaved I mean those deprived the dignity and well being that is the right of every human being, every citizen of God's commonweal....

So does the church have anything to say about healthcare in this country?....Does the church have the right to say anything about justice in the workplace?....Does the church have anything to say about discrimination in any form it takes?....Does the church have anything to say about the absurdity of fighting violence with violence....Should the church dare to speak about government programs and budgets and taxation.....about welcoming the stranger...you bet we dare!....because we are the laborers sent into the harvest to gather into being the rudiments of God's new creation, which means that everything that has to do with the well being and dignity of humanity is our business....As the baptized we are world changers... as the church we are not just a hospital for sinners, but we are the bearers of God's dream for the world.... Glenn may you be blessed richly in the sharing of your wisdom, ripened over the years; Your life's experience will serve the church well, trust that... and may you be blessed in your skill and blessed in your passion and blessed in your love for such a vocation as this.....May your work and the work you engender in your people bear great fruit and may there be laborers enough for the harvest....I for one promise you, I'll help.....and I expect there will be more, more world changers....even if only forty or so.