

REFLECTIONS FROM FATHER DAVID ON CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE RULE OF BENEDICT

E Blast
May 9, 2014

Next Monday, May 19th I will be on retreat with the Order of the Ascension in Mendham, New Jersey. The Order of the Ascension is not your typical religious order that consists of monks or nuns, nor does it require that I take a vow of poverty. The focus of the members of the Order is to promote healthy congregational life in parishes of the Episcopal Church.

I first became aware of this Order while I participated in the two year summer program, the Congregational Development Institute (CDI) in Seattle, Washington. Since then I have attempted in my ministry to model and practice the tools that I learned at CDI. This year when we meet we will focus a great deal of our time on what is known as the Benedictine Promise. This promise is based upon the Rule of St. Benedict (c. 480-526). Benedict lived at a time of great upheaval in Italy: the Roman Empire had collapsed and Italy had been invaded by barbarians. Benedict and a few followers retreated to form a religious order and the rule of Benedict was written. Though this rule is almost fifteen hundred years old I believe it is still relevant today. There are three parts of the Promise: Stability, Obedience and Conversion of Life. I wish to take time the next several weeks to reflect with the entire parish about each one of these elements beginning with Stability.

Stability allows us to reflect about how God is active in community, in our lives and in specific situations we encounter on a daily basis. Stability requires us to trust in the community of faith as well as gain a deeper acceptance of ourselves, of "the other", and turn away from the illusions that draw us into times of boredom, resentment and escapism. By being grounded in this stability, we will learn how the grumbling in our hearts hurts us and the community of faith as well as become more self aware with how we are with others and with God.

I see this stability play out in our weekly celebration of the Holy Eucharist and in making a personal commitment to pray for members of the community and to say the Daily Office (morning or evening prayer), either at Church or at home. The importance of stability is the first step and invites us to a deeper relationship with God and one another.

No matter what is happening in our lives, we know that we can always return to know God in the eating of bread and drinking of wine at communion each week. We feel safe and we are called to place our lives in the care and love of God even when the world seems to be swirling around us. Stability frees us to be ourselves and to be honest about how we feel as we come to God -- as we are and not the illusion about who we want to be. God loves us no matter what.

As we prepare for the Annual Meeting next month, I invite you to join me in reflecting on the importance of stability for us as a faith community. Reflect on the following questions this next week: Am I making time to say morning or evening prayer on a daily basis? Do I intentionally pray for every member of SsAM on an ongoing basis? Do I grumble when I feel discouraged or afraid because my day is not going the way I want it to? Do I focus on my relationships or do I have such high expectations of others that I will always be disappointed?

SsAM is an amazing and vibrant faith community and God is not done with us. Let us learn together how we might be and continue to become a parish that desires being in relationship with God and one another that cannot be shaken by the twists and turns of life. Thanks be to God.

May 16, 2014

Last week I reflected with you on the first element of the Benedictine Promise: *Stability*. This week I wish to focus my attention on the element of *obedience*. The word Obedience may have negative connotations for some of us. I wish to offer a rationale of why I think Obedience offers a positive view of how we are called to live in community as followers and lovers of Jesus.

From Robert Gallagher's book entitled, **Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church**, Fr. Gallagher defines Obedience this way: "*As a parish we find God as we listen deeply to the world; to Scriptures, to the Church, now and through the ages; to each other, to the creation, and to the deepest longings and prayer of our heart.*" This obedience is experienced by the way we are open to listen and respond to one another, to the Bishop and the Diocese of Delaware and to the larger Church.

This obedience compliments the stability that I reflected upon last week. Stability keeps us grounded in the faith and the tradition of the Church: the study of Scriptures, the teaching of the Apostle's, the breaking of the bread, fellowship and in the prayers. The difficulty is that few folks give time to practice these elements of the faith. And yet these spiritual practices invite and encourage us to form a stronger and loving community of followers of Jesus Christ. How?

Obedience is all about listening. Listening to God, listening to one another, listening to the Word of God in Church and in one of the Prayer Book Offices, listening to what is happening out in the world and listening to what the Church teaches. There is, however, a tension that you and I fall into on a regular basis. As human beings we think we can do it better than the person up the street. We tend to listen to ideas that we already assent too and any understanding of the world that contradicts what we understand, we dismiss. Jesus called us to love one another as ourselves and this tendency to "grumble" and "complain" leads to resentment and non loving practices.

What would the Episcopal Church of Saints Andrew and Matthew look like if we were each to commit to become a listening parish? This could mean making a commitment to listen to God in silent prayer; saying the office of Morning Prayer; praying for each other; and praying to be

open and humble to what God might be trying to say to you in the midst of the noise and busyness of our daily lives.

In the end, obedience moves us to lose our lives so that we might gain them. What do I need to surrender so that I might listen more deeply to God and the person sitting next to me on Sunday morning, at work and at home? What is God calling me to do at SsAM? Am I willing to respond? Let us become a parish community that practices **Stability and Obedience** and, in the process, become a parish that listens and responds to the God who formed us and continues to love us unconditionally.

May 23, 2014

This is the last in a three part series of E Blast reflections focusing on the Benedictine Promise. So far, I have spent time on the elements of stability and obedience. This week I wish to spend time reflecting with you on the third piece of the triangle: **Conversion of Life**. I begin, as I did last week, with Bob Gallagher who describes conversion of life as the following: "*As a parish we find God on our journey together and in the new places we will go as a parish; in losing life to find life; in our openness to transformation.*"

Conversion of life is both exhilarating and threatening. It is exhilarating to be on a journey with God and with one another. If we live into stability and obedience, we will open ourselves to see change --not as something to be resisted --but a moment to embrace and celebrate. For that very reason, conversion of life can also be very threatening because none of us like to change. Change is going to happen if we like it or not. It can not be stopped or avoided. Oh, the places God will lead us if we are open to being transformed into the likeness of Christ. We might ask, who me? I can't possibly live as Christ lived. I have done so many bad things and I feel so bad about myself that not even God would want me (not to mention love me). This is an attitude that keeps us stuck, not able to move forward into new life or to experience the adventures we could have along the journey. To change this internal attitude does not mean we automatically proclaim: 'Listen Everyone I am now going to life as though Christ lives within me and You better watch out'. This would not be right on so many levels.

By practicing and experiencing **Stability, Obedience and Conversion of Life**, we are living into a place of openness and humility. Rather than holding onto what we cannot change, we practice letting go and trusting that God is in the middle of what is happening in our lives. I am not talking about change for change sake. I am talking more about how with an open and humble heart, we change into more Christ like behavior. What might this change look like?

--It might be that we risk failure by moving out of our comfort zone and getting involved in a ministry (or a new ministry) at SsAM.

--It might be calling on a newcomer or one of our shut-ins and not being afraid to risk being known by someone new.

--It might be realizing that we have so much to be thankful for and making a commitment to be more generous with our time, talent and treasure.

--It might be giving because we feel so grateful to be alive and knowing that we have been made into a new creation.