

24 May, 2009  
Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel

Good morning again. Very good to be with and I want to thank you all for your welcome and your great hospitality on this very special day. When Colin saw me coming in with my mitre and my cope on, he kind of stared at me with this look that made me reminded of the bishop who ordained me.

He said he was standing back in the back one morning with his mitre on, his cope and this four year old just looked at him intently for minutes. And he finally tugged on his cope and said, "Where are you from?" And that's the look he [Colin] had on his face today, too.

After listening just long enough, you'll be able to tell I'm from the south. And from Texas. A gentleman at the seven-thirty service reminded me that the only good thing that came out of Texas was a highway and an empty bus, but here I am, so... It's good to be with you.

I once knew a very young woman priest and she was so young. She even looked younger. And so when she was doing a wedding one time she reported that the father of the bride kept looking her over with a bit of disgust. And he finally in a somewhat indignant voice asked her, "Just how old are you?" To which my friend, who may have been young but was certainly not dumb, replied, "When I wear this stole, I'm 2,000 years old." Indeed. Because when she does that she is not only herself, when she wears the stole which the church has chosen for her to do and has bestowed upon her, when she wears that, she is not only herself, she is *the tradition*. She stands in for all of us no matter where she is.

This passage from Acts today is basically a description of the first election of a bishop. We hear in Acts that they had finished their diocesan profile, done all of the background checks, and then presented two candidates: Barsabbas and Matthias. They drew lots and when all was said and done, Matthias was added to the host of apostles. From there, many more elections would ensue.

Those of us in the greater Church (with a capital C) practice apostolic succession know this because this is just what they're talking about here. This unbroken line back to the apostles themselves. Of course, the line is not totally unbroken, but largely we can trace back the apostolic line. Where we can't, we say the intent was to keep that line intact. And in fact we believe it was even if we do not know who or how.

So every bishop that has ever been ordained has something signifying them - usually a number. So my number comes from the American line from Samuel Seabury who was the first bishop in the Episcopal Church in the U.S. number one. And we are given our number at our ordination. My number is 1021. A thousand twenty-one since Samuel Seabury. The bishop that confirmed me when I was 18 years old was 747. He just loved that—he used it all the time.

Now, in the House of Bishops, most of us do not walk around calling each other by our numbers, although every once and awhile they come up. For instance, when the house votes in a roll call vote it is done in numerical order and by name of office. Never by your name. So the most senior bishops are called first down to the most recent. So in Acts we see the beginning of all of this.

If we stay with the story and ponder it a bit, one has to wonder: What happened to Barsabbas? He came in second. He went another path. We never hear another word about him after this. One has to wonder if he continued being a disciple of Jesus nonetheless. We would hope.

I bring all of that up today for a number of reasons. The passage from Acts certainly being one. This is what it is all about. And more personally because this church, Saint Stephen's Longview, was the very first walkabout stop. You may remember that; when we elected a bishop. I most remember your chapel which we celebrated Eucharist in as the first place that I actually answered questions and this room as the first place I ever opened my mount in the Diocese of Olympia to a crowd.

I will never forget it because on that night I was terrified. I told my wife flying out here there is no way they will elect a Texan, so don't worry about it. And then here I was in front of people asking questions but there was something comforting about this holy place. I was glad it started in this space. I met some of the first people of this diocese in this space so it will always be quite important to me.

That night I had no clue, and really, uh, no belief that I would become your next bishop, number 1021. I had no idea. Any of you there that night probably didn't as well - and some of you are probably still mourning it and for that I'm sorry. I completely understand that and yet here we are and here I am. I thank you for the hospitality of that night and for the many times we've been here since and to have other diocesan programs.

In that time and in that story, the apostles had gathered together to select who would replace Judas in their midst. They had suffered the loss of Jesus and Judas. Now we tend to forget sometimes that Judas had been a friend, had been a companion, on their way. Yes, they may well have felt betrayed but nonetheless they had walked, worked, prayed, and dreamt together. They were mourning a great deal and replacing, filling a void if they could: they were now putting together their way to carry on. In other words, they knew Jesus had left them work to do and so they were going to put the organization together to do it.

You see, in the Gospel today, we have the end of the farewell discourse which we have been listening to for several weeks now and it may seem strange to you because these are actually the last words Jesus speaks to his disciples before he goes to his death. It seems strange because here we are in the midst of Easter. Why do we have these words? In the midst of Easter?

Well, it makes a lot of sense actually. It's good for us to remember how we got here and that in fact even in the midst of our Easters we will also experience death. Even in our Easters, the joy and alleluias will not be absolute, constant, unrelenting. Even in our Easters, we will encounter life as it is lived, all the ups and downs. It is good to have these words here to remind us: The kingdom has not come. That we still do, in fact, need to work for all that Jesus called his apostles and therefore all of us to.

This week some interesting research was reported. Two authors are going to publish a book in about a year about this, but what they reported was that they had basically found that people that attend church and truly attempt to follow a faith path are nicer, more polite—I know, it's hard for some of you to believe but it's true. This is what they've found. That when people go to church they actually feel more connected. Not only with the people they know; with people they don't know. And they tried to find other corollaries for why this would be true and they couldn't.

The corollary was church. Church, which our laughter shows, is certainly not perfect but a grand experiment that has proven against all odds that it can carry on. It does seem to change us. Even this research says it changes people.

So even in our Easters and our journeys and in our callings from Christ we will sometimes be Matthias; called by the community to serve. Sometimes we'll be Barsabbas; called to be in the election but not elected. Sometimes we'll be called to be in the crowd simply to cast the votes for how this will go. And it in no way diminishes our role, whatever our role is, and all that we're called to.

So today as those being confirmed and who will reaffirm their vows come forward—I told them this yesterday but I will tell them again—you too are part of that line that was started in this story from Acts. Greg Rickel, who happens to be the Eighth Bishop of Olympia, number 1021, will lay his hands on you to represent the apostolic line.

But it's not me. I merely fill an office for which I was chosen to represent that line. I am actually as a person not that important to all of this. The Church settled that a long time ago. I'm like that one priest who so wisely said, "When I wear this stole, I'm 2,000 years old."

You then, who are confirmed today, will be in the line - long repeated history - [of] thousands and thousands of others who have done the same, many in this room. That's the very reason we lay on hands and we insist on bishops doing it.

That's what the word Episcopal means: It's Greek for *bishop*. That's what I always find interesting when people say: 'You know, the Episcopal Church would be great if we didn't have bishops.' They may well be right, but it is the name of our church. And we bought that as a tradition because it bound us together. It was a sign and symbol of us being bound to one another and keeping us focused on all that we're called to in this thing called the Body of Christ.

It started—all of it—with a small band of believers who were most likely mourning and wondering could they go on? They did. That's why we're all here today.

We often forget that for all the joy and comfort we get from all of this, we actually do it to honor them. To keep alive what they have passed down to us so that we might be in that succession and pass it along to the next generations.

So on this Sunday as we await Pentecost (which is next Sunday), which is the day when we will recognize the Church being blessed and born into our history, we know on this day that in fact we are always waiting for the Kingdom of God. It's not here yet. We get glimpses of it, but it's not here.

You today stand in the long line of those who came to stand and say against all of what the world might say that you believe that. I believe the Kingdom can and will come. You come to honor that small band of fisher folk and common people who gave their hearts to follow Jesus Christ even unto death and beyond. So when you come up here, I hope you will grasp that. That you will let it pour over you. And you that witness it and perhaps can remember the day you did the same, I hope you take it in too. Remember all it meant, all it called you to and recommit today as you watch these disciples do the same.

On that day that Acts tells us about, the Church changed forever and we enter that understanding that we have of 'This is a body—the body of Christ.' And today it will be changed—forever changed. It will happen right before your very eyes. It will be changed here before us. Proof...proof that this thing, the Body is alive. Living. True. You don't want to miss that.

Amen.