

Sunday, January 10, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
Fr. Justin's First Sunday at All Saints

To Equip the Saints for the Word of Ministry

Before I delve into my sermon, I want to say how overjoyed and humbled I am to be here with you today. If you only remember one thing from my sermon today, I want you to know that I am excited about beginning ministry together, and over the past few months I've slowly been falling in love with this community of All Saints. In fact, after I shared with a close friend about being called as your new rector, he said he was very excited for me because he knew it would have hit me harder than the other churches I was applying to if this didn't work out. I had previously shared with him my degree of interest in your community. It's kind of like dating—a rejection from someone you're totally into hits you a lot harder than from someone you're just a little interested in. That's to say, I'm totally into you, All Saints, and I wouldn't have said 'yes' to the call if it was otherwise.

In a small Midwestern church, as the service was ending, the new preacher was relieved to have made it through his first month of services. He was feeling rather pleased with how he was settling into this new parish and walked to the back of the parish to greet people as they were leaving. After greeting a few adults, a seven year old came up to him boldly and said, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money!" The priest replied, "Why thank you, but why?" The little boy responded, "Because my daddy says you're one of the poorest preachers we've ever had!"

All jokes aside, I'll tell you that preaching is a strange art, especially when it's your first Sunday at a new church. So typically, I like to preach on the Gospel lesson for the day, cracking it open like an ancient treasure chest and helping to reveal its connection to our life here and now. We will have many Sundays for that kind of sermon, as well as the half-dozen other styles I'm known to employ from time to time, but today there are a couple things on my heart I want to explore, at the beginning of our ministry together.

In his letters, known as The Epistles, Saint Paul always starts his letters in a certain manner. In the Book of Romans he begins, "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints..." and in First Corinthians, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints . . ." So, I address you, "To all that be in San Leandro and beyond, beloved of God, called to be saints . . ." It couldn't be more fitting that your church is named All Saints—named after a feast celebrating, yes, all the saints in heaven, but also a reminder that we are all—you and I—called to be saints, here and now. 'Saint' simply means 'holy one' – in Spanish, *los santos*, the holy ones. We are all called to a common vocation of being vessels of the Divine—ministers of love—agents of peace—ambassadors of the Gospel—in a world in dire need of healing.

In his letter to the saints in Ephesus, Saint Paul writes, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for

the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...that’s me, that’s Deacon Pam . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . that’s you. To equip the saints for the work of ministry. With that understanding in mind, I am pleased to introduce to you the minister of All Saints. Turn to you right and greet the person next to you. If you don’t know them introduce yourself. Behold, the minister of your church! Now turn to the left, and behold the minister of your church! Don’t be afraid to introduce yourself if you don’t know them. Who knew this church had so many ministers!

I have been called here—as well as Deacon Pam—to equip you to be ministers of the Gospel. To equip you by word and sacrament; to equip you through teaching and study; to equip you through pastoral care that tends to your own deep wounds and invites you into growth and healing in your own journey. But what does that mean for you to be a minister of the Gospel? Does that mean preaching, teaching, counseling, and all those roles Reverend Karen or Father Rob used to do? Of course not, that’s why I’m here. To be a minister of the gospel, in part is to be an evangelist. Yep, I dropped the e-word in my first sermon, but I don’t mean evangelist in the bible-banging, hellfire-preaching, proselytizing kind of way. I mean evangelical in the sense of bringing good news to a world where every newspaper I pick up seems to be filled with bad news—violence, ecological disaster, corruption, scandal, and the scars of a world longing for healing.

The word evangelical has ancient roots and comes from a Greek word that just mean “announcement of something good” — or “good news.” We translate this Greek word as gospel, but that really just means good news. There is good news that we have to share with the world, and I believe we live in a world hungering for this news. The Good News is of a love story between God and humanity. The Good News is woven throughout the Eucharistic Prayer you will hear just minutes from now. I invite you as we pray to consider the prayer afresh, to listen to it as if you were hearing it for the first time—or perhaps as if it were your last time to hear these words. It is the story of a God who loves us so much that God the Infinite, God the Timeless, God the Eternal entered into the bounds of space and time to walk among us, to teach us, to love us, and to show us the way to healing and life. If this is true—then that’s pretty good news. More than good, that’s insanely amazing news! But how do you share this news? Saint Francis once said, “Preach the Gospel, use words if necessary.” We are called to manifest this Good News—as the body of Christ in the world, as the holy ones, the saints of God. May our works of love and mercy, compassion and justice be so fierce that people wonder, “Who are these people, and what is this force that compels them?”

I was reading a sermon the other day by Thomas Steagald where he poses the question, “Why do churches die?” He explains, “. . . most often it dies of amnesia. It forgets who it is and what it is. It forgets Whom it represents. It forgets that ‘church’ is a verb, ever growing and changing, ever doing -- worshipping, learning, eating together, praying for one another, reaching out and giving comfort to all within its reach, ministering in all the ways it can.” To be church in the world, we must be willing to face the discomfort of change, growth, and healing in our own lives. We are

invited to shake off any sense of comfort and complacency, and step out in confidence of our call. And if we think there's something special in this place called All Souls where we are equipped and nurtured in word, sacrament, and Spirit, then let us not be afraid to invite others.

I've always found it meaningful to know people's names, whether it's my waiter or the check out guy at Safeway. And sometimes it even catches the grocery clerk off guard when he gives me my receipt and I say, "Thank you, Tom." In my usual way of getting to know people, one day when I was a seminarian in Berkeley I met a gal named Mary. Eventually she asked me what I do and I explained I was a seminarian and doing field education at All Souls Episcopal Church there in Berkeley. When she heard that she exclaimed, "I've wanted to visit there for years! They seem really neat." When I asked her why she hasn't visited she said, and I swear by all things holy that this is a true story, she really said, "Well, nobody's ever invited me." As ministers of this church, we are all called to reach out to those in our community, not just with food and friendship, but also an invitation into a profound and life-changing journey together. And so, just as when a new priest is called to a church, he or she gets business cards, I've bought a gift for you—your own business cards for All Saints. Not to put on your fridge or shuffle into a drawer, but to keep in your purse or wallet for that person you meet who might be longing for community, a spiritual home, a place where they can be embraced and nurtured, and equipped to be ambassadors of healing in this world.

(Father Justin passes out invite cards with Deacon Pam and assistants)

As you accept these cards from me, as a gift to you, as ministers of this church, I ask you to consider this poem from Saint Theresa of Avila, a 16th century Christian mystic:

*"Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body . . .
Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

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