

The Rev. Stanford Adams  
The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Austin, Texas  
Pentecost Sunday; June 4, 2017

I am so glad to be here with you. To the parents of the children that we just baptized: it is an honor for me to begin my time with you on the occasion of the baptism of your children. It is fitting to begin our time together on Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the start of something new, the birth of the church, the arrival of the holy spirit. And In a real and living way, the church is re-born with every new baptism, and it's a privilege for us to be witnesses to that new birth this morning.

I want to tell you a few things about me today; in part, so that we can start to get to know each other, and in part because I bet that my path overlaps with many of your paths. When I look out at you, I see fellow journey-ors, and I hope you will come to see the same in me.

I'm here because what you are creating is a pretty special place. As I've contemplated your call, I've been thinking about the kind of church you are all creating here and in a broader sense, what kind of church we want to be creating for ourselves and most especially today for the children we welcome in baptism.

A lot of what we do here is translating. It is translating the eternal, universal messages we find in the scriptures and in our liturgy and tradition, translating those messages so that they're meaningful in our lives.

I've chosen several ways to make meaning for myself over the years. I chose academics — grades and degrees — as the measure of my worth and the way to experience meaning. Then I chose career achievement as a way to measure my worth...and I mean both outward markers like compensation and subjective markers like what I thought that other people thought of me. That's what life is all about. Maybe our paths have overlapped. Then I chose saving money — the balance in my qualified and non-qualified retirement plans, in particular — that is what created meaning for me. I say that I chose these paths, but I only partly chose them, partly they were handed to me. You know what it's called to have your path handed to you? It's called growing up in the South. I can say that as a Southerner. Really, it's called growing up anywhere, but if you grew up in the South then I think you got a stronger dose.

One theologian calls these our personal salvation projects. The ways we try to create ultimate meaning. I could keep going with my list of personal salvation projects...but the list is already getting embarrassing for me...and you get the picture.

For me, many of these rest on control. You know, I like control so much that I'm the only person in the United States of America that drives a stick shift Honda

Accord. The stick shift family sedan market is not very big. I had to fly to another state to buy it. I don't want some machine controlling what gear I'm driving in. That's the easy stuff. Then there's the harder stuff too. No matter how much pomegranate juice I drink, I may still get sick. No matter how much energy I put in, the business may still fail. No matter how hard I try to meet the expectations of everyone around me, I will let people down. And then who will I be?

I'm sorry to break it to our brand new members, the children we just baptized, but we've already handed you some personal salvation projects. Mine have ultimately fallen apart in so many ways that I'll need a lot of sermons to tell you about it all. The good news is that we've got years to come.

Our Gospel today on the birthday of the church is not a grand kick-off with a triumphal celebration. It's some huddled people who think they've been defeated and whose wounded leader shows up with his wounds still on display. "He showed them his hands and his sides" the author of John writes. The path of Jesus is just the opposite of a personal salvation project. Jesus gives everything up, and not in a way he controls, he gives everything up, and in doing so, he becomes fully united with God.

The first move of becoming a Christian is to be washed clean in the water of baptism. It's to give up the ways we save ourselves. It's why later Jesus says that we have to hate our parents — such a weird passage — we have to come to see that our identity is deeper than we think it is.

We may do everything right and we still lose the business or the marriage. We won't find God in some explanation of why those things happened. We find God in love. Love that shows us that the bottom holds. I'm with you in part because you get this already, it's clear in your motto Love More, Better. When the kids we baptized today encounter the absurdity of God on the cross in their lives, when things happen to them for no reason, let's build a church where there will be a hand outstretched to them in love, a church where they'll encounter God. That is the promise of the Gospel. Let's build a community for them where that promise is realized.

And here's why I'm talking about this on the birthday of the church and on my first Sunday with you: our ways of finding meaning — money, power, control — ultimately at our end they will all fall apart, and when they do, let's have a church that offer us something deeper. A church that offers us a connection to Christ who gave up everything so that we might find our identity in God. That's the beloved community that you're building, that we're building.

There's a temptation for me to think that the first step in building this kind of community is to figure everything out. Generally, my MO is to have a plan and to know as much as I can know about the plan: how it will work, why it will work, what might happen if it doesn't work. Maybe our paths overlap.

If I think about this whole religion enterprise hard enough, then I'll understand God and have it all figured out. Thinking hard enough will save me. But the assumptions behind my thinking salvation project are all wrong: God is not an idea we believe in, or a being somewhere out in space kind of like us except bigger, more powerful, and more in control; instead, God is a reality in which we participate, God is a spirit — a holy spirit, the one we're celebrating today — that moves us into the world. Most of my thinking about God is really idolatry, just making a bigger version of me into God. You know, it's amazing how much God and I agree. The question is not whether you believe in a set of ideas, the question is whether you are taken in by the ways you are connected to your neighbor, the question is whether you're taken up by a mystery that makes you fully alive, taken up by a Spirit that makes you want to be the very best version of yourself, a Spirit that makes you see yourself and the world as they really are, so that you can reach out in love where it's needed most.

Faith is not about getting our ideas right. It is love more, better in operation. It's the spirit that takes us up this morning and changes the way we find meaning for ourselves, the spirit that connects us to deeper ground. That's the spirit we celebrate this morning.

I'm so glad to be with you. I pray that in the ministry we'll share in the years to come, we will find the best of ourselves and we'll find God.