

Pentecost 10 – 20 July 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

It has been a week of many significant religious stories in the news. We have witnessed the start of the conference of Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference, and many of us are wondering what changes this Conference will bring to our Communion. We have also been avidly following the courageous witness of bishop Gene in England as he continues to stand up for the full inclusion of GLBQT communities. With all the media concentration on the future of the Anglican Communion and Bishop Robinson it is easy to forget that this was also the week in which we were reminded just how relatively few residents of Vermont and New Hampshire believe in God: and how even fewer attend religious services.

It is against this backdrop of ecclesiastical warfare within the Anglican Communion and disappearing religious belief that we are also welcoming Madelyn as our new curate. As a newly ordained deacon, Madelyn joins the institutional church at a time of deep uncertainty within the worldwide Anglican family. She is also coming to serve as a campus minister in a college that despite its religious heritage has a deeply embedded tradition of at best enlightened criticism and at worst suspicious distrust of religion. Episcopalians have also always been a religious minority in our local area. And while time heals all, part of our story is found in that first Episcopal academic who had the temerity to organize Episcopal worship and who was essentially kicked out of Dartmouth.

None of us should be in any doubt that as Episcopalians serving God in the Upper Valley in the twenty-first century we too are living in turbulent times. And yet it is out of the heart of this turbulence that Madelyn has discerned the call of God to serve.

You might be forgiven for thinking that there has to be something wrong with someone who is willing to serve the church at such a difficult and unpromising time. But if you consult your scriptures you will see that it is precisely at these times of uncertainty and conflict that God's purposes are made clearest.

In answering God's call to ordained ministry, Madelyn is like Jacob in our first reading. Like Jacob, and like every other person who has ever engaged their imagination, she has dreamed about God. And just as Jacob woke from his dream able to name God as active in the world, so it has been for Madelyn. Through her imagination and her wisdom God has guided her to be with us today, and through those same gifts she will make God present to us.

Madelyn, there are moments of incredible joy ahead of you. You will participate in some of the most precious and uplifting moments of people's lives. You will be enriched beyond measure by coming to know the people in this community. And you will find much that is downright endearing about the Upper Valley. We are all fortunate to live in an area of both outstanding natural beauty and also outstanding artificial intelligence.

By the same token there will be moments of great pain as you stand alongside the suffering and the dying, the lonely and the friendless, the vulnerable and the poor. One of the privileges of ministry, whether ordained or not, is that we share the burdens of others. Some of those burdens are going to be heavy, and frequently so heavy that all you will be able to do is pray, listen, or simply hold a hand.

As our new deacon Madelyn will lead all of us in renewing our efforts to reach out to the marginalized and the outsiders. Aside from her liturgical responsibilities, the unique identifying feature of the diaconate is a commitment to service. Deacons are those whom the

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church sends into the world so that the church may understand, advocate for, and tend to the needs of the vulnerable in society. A long time before this Episcopal church was built, long before this country was founded, long before Queen Elizabeth I gave us our distinctive Anglican polity, even before the scriptures were collated and stitched together. Before all of that, deacons were going from place to place helping the orphans and the widows, ensuring that the hungry were fed.

As a person ordained to the sacred order of deacons, Madelyn has also been placed by God to serve not simply our parish community; but to serve that large proportion of New Englanders for whom 'God' signifies a strange and foreign concept at best. And of course, she cannot be alone if God's dreams for our world are to be realized.

There has been a temptation to view ministry as something that is done by the clergy for everyone else. But the truth of the matter is, the vast majority of Christian ministry in God's church is done by those who are not ordained.

Today our Gospel gives us another take on the parable of the sower. This time, we are treated to a grim and frightening exposition, in which the weeds are collected up and burned with fire. It is an apocalyptic story about the end of time, and a reminder that we are not at liberty as Christians to distinguish between the weeds and the good seed. Refraining from judgment is perhaps one of the hardest qualities of Christian discipleship, and it is one that few clergy are particularly good at.

We are taught at seminary to split hairs and articulate if not angels on pinheads then at least the twenty-first century equivalent - which would probably be the number of pixies in a computer pixel. But if we are to hear the parable of the sower in all its many different

permutations and transcriptions, then as Christians we have to learn how to suspend judgment and to defer criticism.

This does not mean treating vice as if it were virtue, or caprice as compassion. But it does mean all of us returning to the question of who God wants us to serve. I don't believe that God would have us ministering to one another without thought for those who lie outside our religious tribe. In fact, I am pretty sure that to use Paul's language, wherever people are groaning with labor pains, there we are called to serve. Regardless of their hostility or indifference to religion. Regardless of their gender, sexuality, social status, and perhaps hardest for our own community, regardless of their educational achievements.

The greatest danger to the Christian church lies not in far away conferences or statistics about atheism. The greatest danger to the Christian church lies in church goers forgetting that the church is the only institution that exists not for its members but for those who are outsiders. Just by being here today Madelyn is a potent sign to us that God is calling us to reach out beyond all that is familiar.

As God is leading Madelyn into unfamiliar and strange places, so may God continue to call each one of us into new lands and fresh endeavours. At Madelyn's ordination the bishop noted that none of us is worthy of serving God, strictly speaking none of us are up to the task. But it is precisely through each of us, each unworthy and imperfect, that God continues to dream. May each of us open ourselves up to those divine dreams. And may we do all in our power to serve those who have yet to dream of God's all encompassing love. Amen.