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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 12, 2023

Lectionary Year A: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

At our Annual Meeting two weeks ago, I referred briefly to First Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 6, the full citation of which is, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." The Diocese of North Dakota, where I was canonically resident before coming here, has a portion of this passage of Scripture on its seal (in Latin): "Deus incrementum dat." In English, this is usually rendered as "God giveth the increase." Given North Dakota's agrarian heritage, it's easy for one to see the "increase" as the bounty of the harvest, where a smattering of seeds yields many bushels -- a hundredfold or more. The Diocese of North Dakota expands this image further with its bimonthly newsletter, The Sheaf. A sheaf, as you know, is a bundle of cut grain, still on the stalks, which is tied and stood up in preparation for threshing. (Harvesting technology in the twentieth century eliminated sheaves, but it's a quaint image, nonetheless.)

Having a motto like "God giveth the increase" indicates to me an unfettered optimism that characterized the Episcopal Church's early days in the state. Bishop William Walker, eager to bring the Anglican tradition to the prairie, commissioned a special Pullman car that the railroads would bring to towns across the state; inside the coach was a fully serviceable chapel, complete with altar, pulpit, lectern, and pews. Parishes, missions, and preaching stations sprang up in the cities and towns along the railroad lines, and the mission field was as full of promise as the North Dakota sky was wide.

Today, the active baptized membership of the Episcopal Church in North Dakota amounts to approximately three-thousandths of one percent of the state's popula-

tion, which, as you might imagine, isn't very much for a state with only 780,000 people. Much of the hope for the Episcopal Church's growth in North Dakota was dashed when large numbers of immigrants from central and northern Europe established their own churches in the state -- most of them being either Roman Catholic or Lutheran. Throughout much of North Dakota, if you were a churchgoing person and weren't Roman Catholic or Lutheran, you were grouped into an "other" category and no one knew much about your faith tradition.

Of course, there were bound to be a handful of Lutherans in North Dakota with an appreciation for liturgy and The Book of Common Prayer, which would explain me and a few others. Without going into great detail about my journey down the Canterbury Trail to you, allow me to observe that the Holy Spirit's leading of people into the Episcopal Church contains several specifics -- a love of liturgy, dogmatic and theological flexibility, good news (rather than condemnation) preached from the pulpit, and a "big tent" that can accomodate diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds. Unfortunately, none of these are things that fit very well into a sound bite. But somehow, at least two-thirds of the Episcopal Church's membership is not made up of lifelong Episcopals. Even though our numbers don't look so good, we must've done something right.

"God giveth some increase," one might say.

Surely, if the Episcopal Church is to reduce (or reverse) its decline, it can take some pointers from the apostle Paul. (And -- I promise -- today is the last day of my First Corinthians sermon series!) To a divided community at Corinth, Paul writes, "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:7). Paul is trying to get

the point across that personalities matter much less than the Gospel in the community of faith. Now, think of a church that is built around a personality -- say, for example, a charismatic, well-liked pastor. When that charismatic, well-liked pastor either retires or dies, what happens to that church? More often than not, it collapses. Could it be because more faith and confidence was put in that charismatic, well-liked pastor than in God himself?

Paul would say, "Yes." And I would too.

I'm not going to preach with unfettered optimism about our future. Persons of central and northern European heritage from the Great Plains -- like myself -- have a hard time doing that! And while Bishop Walker may have had visions of the Episcopal Church conquering North Dakota, I suppose I'm a bit more realistic or right-sized. If there's anything I'd steer you away from (other than a naive if sincere optimism), it would be personality-driven ministry. Please don't go looking for that one person to save the church...whether I'm here or not! Think instead of how God gives the growth in the things we already do together and communicate that to the people of Warsaw, Winona Lake, and vicinity. As many of you know, we have a Communications and Public Relations committee here at St. Anne's, and a big part of that committee's work involves using the media that's available to us to tell our story. We hope to thereby catch some people who might not have otherwise given us any consideration. And anybody can be a part of this work.

But this is not a magic bullet. It's a strategy, and like any strategy, it needs to be tested, implemented, evaluated, and refined, if necessary. This is where tireless persistence is needed. And tireless persistence can be in short supply -- trust me, I know all about burnout! But burnout becomes less likely when we realize that God is the One who's doing the work. We -- God's vessels -- may become tired and worn, but that doesn't mean there are no other vessels among us.

In faith, let us not be afraid to ask...and be persistent.

And it is God's faithfulness and grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit, that keeps us going. Our God calls and empowers us to do his work. The apostle Paul closes our reading with this observation: "For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9). It is good for us to remember both who we are and whose we are. Indeed, we are Christians, and we are thereby God's beloved children -- or a field or a building to use Paul's words. As such, we are precious and beloved to the One who gave us life. All that we do, therefore, is an offering of thanksgiving back to God for God's life-giving and loving presence among us. Loving and serving God is, therefore, as natural to a Christian as breathing.

Where we may occasionally tire of this work, however, God never does. That could just be a not-too-subtle reminder that we are not God. Not being God, though, is much less demanding work! As God's servants, we are even given time to rest from our labors. But whether we're working or idle, we can always be assured of God's unending faithfulness to us. That alone is enough to sustain us through our many duties and challenges.

Of our duties and challenges, getting the word out about us has assumed a high priority. Bishop Walker in turn-of-the-century North Dakota worked off of an assumption akin to Field of Dreams -- "build it and they will come." Unfortunately, that didn't work too well for the Episcopal Church in North Dakota (though it did elsewhere). Today, virtually no church in much of the developed world can grow under the Field of Dreams assumption, nor can it rely on growing off of the occasional Ryan Fischer who wanders into an Episcopal church at eighteen years old and becomes an Episcopal priest twenty-five years later. Indeed, we'll have to be more strategic, media-savvy, and persistent than we've ever been before.

But, at the same time, we'll have to recognize that all this work isn't really ours. It's God's. And only then will we realize that personalities, egos, and trivial demands are hindrances rather than helps in this work.

But great things will happen when we let God do God's work. We, like Paul, can plant. We, like Apollos, can water. But only God can give the growth. Thanks be to God, therefore, for doing the hardest and most important work of all -- calling and gathering the Church together through the Holy Spirit. If you see St. Anne's grow, remember that the credit goes to our Lord himself, and to our Lord alone.

Amen.