

## Expand or Contract?

Sister Joan Chittister had a wonderful Labor Day reflection about what it means to work.

She began these reflections by quoting an old desert monk, those living in the wilderness in the early days of Christianity to encounter God.

The monk said:

"I never want work that is useful to me but loss to my brother.

For I have this expectation, that what helps my brother is fruitful for me."

Sister Joan then observed that rather than finding the meaning of work as being helpful to each other, the nature of work today puts us at odds with each other.

For example, we educate engineers who discover fracking while at the same time we educate lawyers to sue the engineer because of the damage fracking causes.

We create food companies that feed the world, yet what passes for food causes half the country to become diabetic.

Which in turn allows big Pharma to reap billions in profits.

We've seen this play out in Maui, as years of water misuse transformed the Oasis of Lahaina into a desert.

The results are the catastrophic fires that destroyed a jewel of Hawaii.

“Our lives are lived in the hope that our own choices are life-giving for others, but we have yet to accept the principle that what is not good for others...is not good for ourselves.” Chittister.

And regrettably, this trend of work pitting us against each other extends even into the three great callings: medicine, the law and ministry.

It plays itself out through the ever increasing specialization that is happening in each of the major callings.

There are few general practitioners in medicine, with most specializing in one narrow field.

The same is true in the law and regrettably, it seems to be happening in ministry too.

This perceived need to specialize — and thus limit — what we are able to do and who we are able to serve.

I share these musings with you because of the question today’s gospel lesson asks us:

How do we live and work together as Christians, with Christ at the center of everything we do?

In short, what does it mean that Jesus is actually and truly among us?

Doesn’t it mean that when Jesus is actually and truly among us, the kingdom of God is breaking in?

That when Jesus is actually and truly among us, we are empowered, indeed, we are commanded, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and raise the dead?

When Jesus is among us, God is among us.

And when God is among us – all things come together.

As we move into this time of transition here at St Elizabeth's, the question that has arrived front and center is: what is the work of the priest?

Which is a topic of some controversy.

Some argue that the task of the priest is to provide the sacraments to the people.

Say the mass, hear confessions, pronounce blessings, preach, and provide a Bible study, but not much more.

Which fits with how our other professions are also becoming more narrow, more specialized, more exclusive.

It's a view of a life that moves from baptism through ordination as a life that gets increasingly narrow.

And this narrow view plays out like this.

At baptism, we die with Christ and rise with him, which is Bible talk for saying that we put aside our own self interest, our own needs for controlling people, places, and things, and instead step into the glorious world that Jesus invites us into.

A world of service and caring for each other.

That is the gift and the life of baptism.

And then, when one is ordained as a deacon, the deacon is sent into the larger community to determine what the needs of the community are and to help fashion responses to it.

But when that deacon becomes a priest, taking the narrow view of things, suddenly their duties are limited to presiding at the Eucharist, preaching, hearing confession, and Bible study.

But there's another way of looking at the life of a priest.

Which is, rather than leaving behind the obligations and ministries of baptism and deacon, each new step brings with it, and assumes, all of the previous obligations and ministries.

Meaning, when a deacon is ordained priest, the obligation of service doesn't go away.

The new priest is still a deacon too.

But now, as a priest, they can take into the broader community — that they continue to love and nurture and serve — the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist, the forgiveness of sins, and preaching — as part and parcel of a ministry that remains — among the least, the lost, and the left behind.

This is not a personal opinion.

This is actually the way that our ordained life is defined, described and structured.

And how do we know that?

Because it's in the very book upon which we rest the tenets of our faith, the Book of Common Prayer.

Here is the charge given to every person who seeks to be ordained as a priest just prior to the actual ordination:

"As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim **by word and deed** the **Gospel of Jesus Christ** and to fashion your **life** in accordance with its precepts."

What is it to proclaim by word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Isn't it to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to comfort the sick, and to raise the dead?

That is the **very first task** given to every person who will be ordained a priest in the Episcopal tradition.

And to whom are these deeds and words directed?

That comes in the very next line of the charge.

"You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor."

To "love and serve" means exactly that.

It means we are called to get to know each other at a level where we can and do actually love each other.

It means patiently working through each other's foibles and failures, as well as each other's wonderful gifts and talents.

It means working together to help build up God's kingdom.

And all of this on the part of the priest is done from a standpoint not of coercion or domination or power, but from the standpoint of service.

Which means — washing dishes and scrubbing toilets and pushing a broom — side by side with all the other servants of God.

All of which is a necessary **precondition** to effectively carrying out the last charge to the new priest: "to preach, to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God's blessing, to share in the administration of Holy baptism and to share in the mystery of Christ's body and blood."

A determination to live the gospel flows into service to all who cross our path, church member or not, and that unleashes the grace to preach, forgive and break bread deeply, authentically.

As another priest puts it, this debate over the role of a priest in today's world is a debate over "'churchiness' instead of 'cosmos.'"

There is such a disillusionment with 'churchiness,' which is the building and maintenance of churches and services.

We've overplayed the church card for much of the last thousand years.

Once we divided Christianity into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, all of the individual churches had to prove they were the one true church.

Which preoccupied us with churchy conversation, while taking our eyes off of the cosmos, off of what was right beneath our feet, in

front of our eyes, and the very whole of which we are already a part." R. Rohr.

I hope that as St E's moves forward, that you will embrace the wide view, the larger view of life and ministry.

I hope that you will participate in work that heals and unites.

And I hope your new clergy will trudge this road of happy destiny – by your side.

+amen