

A Sermon by Rt. Rev. William Persell

Last Sunday when our Senior Warden, Lynne Goepper, asked if I would preside this Sunday she suggested that I draw upon my years of experience, most recently as Bishop of Chicago, to speak about the interim period of St John's, now between Rectors. Lynne asked that I say something which would be reassuring to those who are anxious or concerned about the search process and what will come from it. I'm happy to share from my thoughts and experience. Whether or not this will allay anxiety, I have no idea. I was struck by our first reading from Genesis. It's sort of a search process, in this case to find not a Rector for St John's but a suitable wife for Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac. Would that the search for a new Rector were this simple. Abraham's servant travels to their home country and makes a deal with God. The servant will stand by the spring and ask the women who come there for a little water to drink. The one whom God has chosen for Isaac's wife is to respond "Drink and I will draw for your camels also." Sure enough, Rebekah appears, offers the servant a drink and water for the camels. Rebekah is the one and she becomes Isaac's wife.

To St John's search committee I think I can safely say, "It's not going to be this easy..." However, there are things you can take from this passage. The servant knew the territory where he was to search. He would not find a bride among the Canaanites who did not share their faith. The servant surrounded his mission in prayer, trusting in God's guidance and good will towards him and his master, and after finding Rebekah, worshipping and blessing God. Rebekah submitted to questioning about her loyalty and truthfulness. Could she in good faith make this commitment? She was asked if she would do this and she responded, "I will."

Our clergy search processes, over the years, have grown more and more complex. They've also become much more participatory and democratic. The whole congregation has a say in developing the profile of what the congregation needs and wants in a Rector to help carry out its mission. The diocese, in the person of the Bishop, has a say because the parish priest is also a priest of the diocese, serving under the Bishop.

Each diocese has a person responsible for clergy deployment. These persons meet with their counterparts regularly and share information about clergy who are seeking a move, and congregations with openings. The Episcopal Church also has a rich data base of available clergy - but you need not limit the search to those currently looking. It might be that an appropriate candidate could be prevailed upon to consider a move.

Much of the search process must remain confidential to protect the ministries of those involved. Therefore the Search Committee won't report on who is being considered. But it is important for the Committee to keep the parish informed in general terms of where they are in the process. The whole parish needs to hold the Committee and those being considered in prayer.

From my experience I'd offer a few words of advice to the Search Committee. First, do not limit your pool of candidates by arbitrarily eliminating whole categories of persons by gender, race, marital status, sexual orientation or age. Congregations which cast the widest possible net generally wind up with the best results, sometimes to their great surprise and future growth.

When checking references in the final rounds, talk with persons who are not on the applicant's list but who should know the person and his or her ministry.

When questioning clergy candidates pay more attention to what they have and have not done, rather than what they think ought to be done regarding such issues as congregational growth and development, work with youth, Christian formation for all ages, stewardship and ecumenical and interfaith outreach.

Find a priest with skills, compassion, intelligence and a sense of humor, all grounded in a deep prayerful commitment to Jesus Christ and to the Episcopal Church.

In my experience in the Diocese of Chicago which has a wide diversity of congregations -- urban, suburban, small town and rural, African, African-American, Hispanic, Korean, Anglo, rich and poor -- the congregations which did the best in confronting the turmoil of the past five years were those where the Rector or Priest-in-Charge was clear about where s/he stood on the issues and made it clear that it was alright for others to disagree. Parishes had difficulty when the priest was not faithful to the ordination vow of being loyal to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church, or when the Rector tried to lead the congregation against the Church, or was confused and ambivalent about the actions of our Church. Rather than being a strong non-anxious presence, those clergy fed into the anxiety of their congregations, sometime with disastrous consequences.

From what I can see and hear, St John's is in a good place. Lay leadership is strong. The buildings and grounds are well cared for. Worship and music involve everyone. St John's is seeking to be a better steward of God's creation. This church offers hospitality to the wider community, spiritual and educational programs, and outreach to persons in need through the food shelf, the new second-hand store and other programs. St John's supports the worldwide mission of the Episcopal Church. We have much to offer a new priest who comes to join and lead us in worship and mission.

I started attending St John's with my family in 1952. Over the years I've been an acolyte, bell-ringer and sweeper of the walks. For four years I served as a summer supply priest. I'm filled with many fond memories of this place, and the people I've known here. I give thanks for St John's, Essex, and have great hope for our future.

I'm also proud and thankful for all that the Episcopal Church has represented in this nation and throughout the world, and the leadership we are offering now. We no longer call ourselves the Episcopal Church – USA, or ECUSA for short, because we have dioceses in some 14 nations from Taiwan to Central and South America to Europe. House of Bishops and General Convention and other meetings are done with simultaneous Spanish translation; our largest diocese, Haiti, is French-speaking.

We also have a very strong organization which we generously fund: Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD.) It's my privilege to serve on the ERD board. We currently have programs with mostly Anglican partners in 40 nations around the globe directly impacting over 2 million people a year. Episcopalians have donated millions of dollars for recovery from for recovery from the Asian tsunami, millions more for work in the Gulf Coast – USA, and millions more for

Nets for Life, anti-malarial programs throughout Africa and the Caribbean. Episcopal Relief and Development has a highly motivated, skilled staff who represent our church well as they respond to disasters and build for long term development capacity with our partners.

(And now I bring us back to where we started this morning...) When Abraham's servant brought Rebekah back and she became Isaac's wife, we are told "he loved her." When the Search Committee and Vestry bring us a new Rector, may we grow to love him or her, as we did Eileen. In the interim, be strong and of good cheer, faithful in prayer and worship and service, ready and eager to join in the dance as we are summoned by our Lord Jesus Christ.